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Prologue

"THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!"

A young man up in the morning at the entrance of his property slammed the sledgehammer down hard onto the top of a timber post, driving it hard into the ground. He grunts, lifting the tool over his head once more before swinging back over his shoulders, at long last driving the post firm into the ground. Without a minute more of hesitation, the young man retrieved another post, lined it up in a small hole he had pre-dug in the ground, before lining up the sledgehammer once more to repeat the same monotonous task.

This man in question was one local of the rural town of Morrisvale on the Eastern Australian Coast, the son of a carpenter, James H. Steele, more locally known as "Jim". Jim was a simple type of bloke living a humble, more simple life, though he was not one without intellect. He wore his usual attire that day; A broad-brim dark-brown Akubra hat, a scarlet long-sleeve button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a pair of black trousers and some brown Williams boots.

After finally driving the second post in with his strength, Jim examined the post to see if it was straight enough. He eyes it, closing his right eye and crouching down to examine it compared to the horizon.

He grunts, getting back up; "Not bad, Jim, not bad," he complimented himself, before deciding to take a small break. He sat down in a folding camping chair he had set up earlier in the morning and took a swig of some black tea he had brewed himself; Thankfully, it was still somewhat warm, much like the weather forecast. He looked across the road, a truck with a load of livestock drove past, intending to pass through the town. Jim relaxes, looking into the dense bushland, admiring the view.

This serenity, however, was interrupted as he saw a figure shift in between the trees. Initially, Jim thought he was seeing things, but sure enough he could tell that someone

was sluggishly walking in between the trees towards a long-since dried up creek-bed across from his property. He watches the individual, who he could now tell was a woman, stumble slowly and sluggishly through the trees. To the surprise and concern of Jim, she suddenly stumbles, collapsing to the ground and into the base of the dried-up creek-bed, seemingly falling unconscious.

"Shit!" Jim exclaims, running across the road from his property and into the tree line.

Not before long, he at last reached the woman in the slight gully, calling out to her to see if she was okay, deeply concerned for her well-being; "Hello! Hello, lady! Are you alright there?"

Jim stops, looking down at the woman who was barely conscious, lying face-up in the dirt. He noticed just how strange this woman was, taking note of her appearance; She had a fair skin complexion, and long gray hair which Jim personally had never seen before, the right side of her hair partially shaved in a modern type of haircut usually seen in urban areas. She wore short clothing; a dark gray crop top, a pair of black shorts, black leggings which stretched up to her thigh, and a pair of black and gray shoes.

Jim, concerned for her well-being, placed his palm on her forehead, confirming that she was suffering from heat stress and a heat-induced temperature. Without a second more thought, he speaks to her, clear and concise; "Hang in there, mate, I'm going to get you out of here! Just, please, hang in there!"

Jim then proceeds to gently pick the woman, heaving her into his arms with a grunt before walking as fast as he could back up into his property. In a rush decision, he jogs up to his Ute, opening the door to the best of his ability with the woman still in his arms and carefully rests the barely conscious woman in the passenger's side. Jim rushes over to the driver's side, swings the door open, and gets in with haste. In a rush, he slams the door shut, starting the engine and turns on the air conditioner on to full blast, cooling the interior down.

"Come on, matey, stay with me," Jim demands, increasingly concerned for the woman slumped in the passenger's seat who was trying her best to open her eyes with little success.

Jim floors it, speeding down the gravel and dirt path from his house and onto the main road into town, thanking the heavens that there was barely any traffic on the road at that time. He briefly every-so-often darts his gaze over to the woman with deep concern, who was still barely conscious and groaning ever so slightly, her face flushed red with sweat.

At long last Jim pulls up next to a pharmacy, hastily parking the car before swinging his door open, barging out of the driver's seat and rushing to the other side. Jim curses under his breath, swinging the passenger's side door open and hastily picking up the woman in his arms, reassuring her that she was going to be saved.

The man barged right into the pharmacy, just about smashing both doors with his entire body weight, carrying the just about unconscious stranger in his arms. With haste and bated breath, he calls out to any possible occupants.

"Oi, Victor! Victor, mate, I need help here! Vic!"

An older gentleman stumbles out of the office door adjacent to the front counter, answering the plea: "What the bloody hell's going on?"

Jim, just about to pass out with exhaustion himself, shows the resident pharmacist the stranger, almost unconscious in his arms; "Look, I found this woman on the edge of my property, she's just about half dead! Got here as fast as I could!"

The pharmacist quickly realized the urgency of the situation; "Ah, shi- Quickly, in here!"

He then escorts Jim into his office, a bed and other assorted adequate equipment waiting for their arrival. Jim manages to rest the stranger on the bed, heaving from exhaustion himself, before slumping on an adjacent chair provided to him. He rubs the sweat from his eyes as he curses from under his breath, watching the stranger intensely with concern. With haste, the pharmacist gets to work, checking up on the state of the stranger; temperature, any possible wounds, breathing rate, so on and so forth.

After a quick examination, he comes to his conclusion: "Heat exhaustion and moderate dehydration. Any minute more out there, and she'd be gone."

Immediately, the pharmacist acquires an IV bag full of fluid, hanging it up on a stand. He then inserts a needle attached to the bag itself into the stranger's arm, for immediate flow of the contents. Afterwards, he adjusts the air conditioner in the room to the coldest setting, at the highest possible flow rate. After much effort, the pharmacist himself sits down back into his chair, wiping his brow.

"Will she be alright?" Jim asks, full of concern.

"She'll be fine, mate, don't worry," Victor responds, taking a sip from a canister from his desk; "She's very bloody lucky you found her when you did."

The two men look towards the stranger once more, observing as the treatment stabilised her condition: her breathing had quickly stabilised, getting deeper and steadying to a reasonable rate. The two men both let out a collective sigh of relief, at last their efforts paying off.

"So, wait a minute, Jim, where did you find her," Victor asks Jim, genuinely curious.

"Just on the outskirts of my property, where that little dip towards that old creek is," Jim explains, turning towards Victor; "Got no bloody idea as to where she came from, or why she's dressed like she's come from the city, but here she is."

"Righto," Victor acknowledges, once again turning to his patient. He noticed that the stranger had at last begun showing more signs of life, her eyes slightly opening, looking up towards the ceiling. With this prompt to act, Victor begins talking to his patient; "Hey, lady, you okay?"

The stranger nods ever so slightly, obviously still weak.

"Don't try to move, just rest. You're safe now, but you're suffering from heat stress. Just rest for now, and I'll let you go when you've recovered."

The stranger once again nods, groaning slightly before closing her eyes again.

"You did a good thing there, young Jim," Victor remarks, grabbing Jim's shoulder; "You've saved her life."

"Well, shit, I wasn't going to let her die, now was I," Jim shrugged, letting out a slight chuckle through his teeth, sipping on his own water.

Victor snickers in return, as well taking a swig from his canister himself, both men awaiting the results for this patient. The room had cooled to a reasonable degree, allowing for Victor to lower the flow rate of the air conditioner. Jim looked at his watch, then back to the stranger, then to Victor.

"If you need me, I'll be across the road in the servo," Jim told the doctor, still observing his patient, writing notes of her progress.

Victor merely gave a slight nod, before waving him off: "All good, matey, I'll see you when you get back."

With that, the taller young man got up with a wheeze from all the effort and stress from mere minutes ago, stretched his arms before quietly cursing once more over his tired,

aching body, and set off. The room was quiet, with only the quiet buzzing of the air conditioner and the hum of the computer monitor to keep the doctor and his patient company. Minutes had passed before movement arose, with the stranger beginning to move once more, slowly raising her arm to place her palm onto her forehead.

Victor, noticing this, raised his attention to the stranger, getting up from his chair and walking over: "Hello? Are you feeling any better?"

The stranger turned her head slightly to her right, glancing through strained, tired eyes at the doctor now standing next to her: "...nngh... f-feel like shit."

Victor, nodding his head slightly, noted in his clipboard: "10:15AM – Patient Improving: Drowsiness and Fatigue continues."

Victor adjusts the IV bag, retrieving a spare onto his desk if needs be. He looks at his clipboard and places it back onto his desk, checking that everything was still in order. Before he could turn back around to his patient, she begins to speak, this time with a question:

"H...hey... a-are you V-Victor," she groggily asks, trying to raise her head with more success than minutes earlier, her strength once again returning.

Victor turns around, wiping his brow before taking a swig of his canister once more: "Yes, I am, though there are two Victors in this town – I'm Dr. Victor Price."

"So... n-not- argh- not Victor... M-Malloy?" The stranger once again lies her head back down onto the pillow.

"Oh, Malloy," the doctor answers, almost bluntly; "No, I'm not Victor Malloy. He lives further up a couple of miles to the west. Why, what about him?"

"...W-was hoping to... speak w-with him," the patient replies, rubbing her forehead once more, though this time her answer and manner of speaking was much clearer than moments ago as she once again gained consciousness.

Victor Price scoffs before letting out a wheezing laugh; "Well, good luck with that – he's an old bastard who will attack anyone and everyone, if not everything, for even looking at him or anything he owns. My best advice to you is to stay away from him as far as humanly possible. What do you want from him, anyway? You look like one of them, I dunno, university student journalist types."

The patient glances slightly at the doctor, hesitating slightly; "Y-yeah... agh- yeah, some-something like that... look- I don't want to talk... can you... keep it d-down?"

"Of course, no worries," the doctor replies, coughing slightly before returning to his computer.

Once again, silence returned to the office, allowing for the stranger to return to a resemblance of sleep once again. That was until, after a while, when Jim knocked on the door and made himself known to be present. Victor Price opens the door slightly, telling the young man to keep it down in accordance with his patient's request. Jim obliged, gently placing a bottle of water onto the desk and a pear he had just bought.

"So, how's she going," Jim whispered, glancing over to the bed.

"She's stabilising, I reckon she'll be out of here within the hour," the doctor whispered in return.

Jim nodded, sitting once again in his original spot. A little while later, the stranger was now able to sit up in the bed, drinking some water provided to her for ongoing sustenance. At this point, both IV bags had been used, and the needle was now discarded from the stranger's arm.

After a brief check-up on the stranger's current state of health, the doctor made his conclusion: "Alrighty, I reckon you're all set," Victor told the stranger; "For the moment, stay out of the sun, drink plenty of water, and whenever you can continue to rest. Any more problems, you can come back to me."

"Sure, noted," the stranger replied bluntly, still trying to get used to her surroundings after the ordeal an hour or so earlier.

"I'll pay on her behalf, Victor, don't worry," Jim offered, placing a couple of bills onto the desk next to the doctor.

Victor thanked the young man, accepting the payment, throwing it into his wallet.

"Thanks for that, I guess," the patient thanked bluntly once more, without looking at the young man now in front of her.

Day 1

They both walked out of the pharmacy, the gentle wind greeting them both once more, with the stranger walking one direction, and Jim walking the other, but not before the young man asked her if she needed anything on her way, only to be met with a blunt "no" before taking off across the road, sitting down on one of the benches. What seemed strange to Jim, other than her sudden appearance on the boundaries of his property, was why she looked frustrated, if not slightly anxious. It didn't seem that she was anxious about her earlier ordeal, rather about something else entirely. Still concerned about her wellbeing, he decided to sit on the side of the road adjacent to the stranger, without trying to make it so obvious that he was perhaps spying on her, though it was without maliciousness.

That is where young Jim sat for the next five minutes, looking up from his phone every-so-often to see whether or not the stranger was still in, at least, a self-manageable condition, trying to be inconspicuous. He wondered if his expertise of being inconspicuous was paying off. He didn't need to wonder for too long, as the stranger was now walking towards him at quite an alarming rate. This alerted Jim, prompting him to quickly stand up, before being confronted by the stranger face-to-face once more.

"You're stalking me, aren't you?" the stranger barked through slightly gritted teeth, coming right into his face.

"Oh, what, so it's called "stalking" these days to watch out for someone who had a medical episode," Jim remarked back, his figure ever-so-slightly towering over the stranger.

"So what? Why the fuck is it your business," the stranger barked back, frustration in her voice now turning into a hint of anger.

"It's called 'courtesy', ever heard of it," Jim snapped back. Like this stranger, Jim, too, was prone to anger in times of direct confrontation.

The stranger shot him a real dead-eye look, seemingly taken back by his retorts back to her. The stranger took a shallow breath, then sighed harshly: "Thank you for being worried, okay? But shit, if you're worried about me, just come up and ask how I'm going, and don't be a fucking creep about it!"

Jim nodded: "Look, I apologise; you're right – shouldn't have gone around that the way I did. So, anyhow, why are you down this way? I heard something earlier about Victor Malloy?"

"I was hoping if... if I could speak with him, it's-it's for an interview about him, why he's- yeah, why he's so hated," the stranger "explained", stumbling over her own words.

Jim seemed almost incredulous; "So you came out here not knowing why he's so hated around here? I'll tell you why; he's this region's scourge, an absolute stain on Australian society. He's been in and out of prison more times than anyone else. He's robbed, laundered, and intimidated everyone in this region from here to the Summit where he currently resides. If you want to know more, I could perhaps take you up there to speak with him, but you'll need someone to protect you up there - the bastard's dangerous."

The stranger hesitated, thinking about the offer, deep in thought. After a couple of seconds, she sighed, and looked back up at Jim: "You know what? Sure, I'll come with you. There better be no shady shit like you pulled off just now, because I will quite literally end your life."

Jim raises his hands, backing off: "You can take my word for it, I'm not the type to do that! If I do, then you have permission to kill me, yeah?"

The stranger mumbled something harsh from under her breath, before nodding slightly: "Lead the way."

Jim nodded, gesturing for the stranger to follow him. He led her to his Ute, seemingly 40+ years old in appearance. It was a moderate gray in colour, with small signs of its age appearing on the exterior. Jim climbed into the driver's seat, as the stranger followed, squeezing herself inside to the passenger side. After checking with the stranger that everything was sorted, he started the engine, the old workhorse powering to life, before pulling away, passing houses, and into the surrounding ranges.

The stranger stared out the window, giving brief yet stabbing, incredibly suspicious glances back towards the driver, who paid no attention to his passenger but to the road ahead. The road got more barren, properties and houses being exchanged for large, open plains with the occasional house off into the distance. After a while, Jim turned to the

right off the main road into a gravel and dirt track, the ride became that bit rougher as the tires contacted the uneven ground.

The stranger became alert, noticing how suspicious this road they were now traveling on was. She furiously snapped her head once again towards the driver, who was still looking ahead; "What the fuck is this!?"

Jim jumped briefly, spooked by the sudden yelling shattering the trancing quiet; "This is the road up to Malloy's property! Fucking hell, woman, don't scare me like that!"

"I told you once that I would KILL you if you tried anything shady, and I dunno, but this looks VERY fucking shady to me," the stranger barked, bearing her teeth with a ferocious stare which Jim had never seen anything like up until that point.

"Malloy's a very fucking shady guy, lady, that's why he lives in the middle of ruddy nowhere," Jim explained, getting slightly uncomfortable with his ill-tempered passenger; "I don't know what to tell you. Now, either you can get out here if you don't trust me and risk suffering heat exhaustion AGAIN and DYING out here, or we'll finish this trip up there in the comfort of this Ute; the choice is yours, but you're beginning to really test my fucking patience."

The stranger gave Jim a real deadeye look, eyes wide and piercing. She was about to bark something in return, but hesitated briefly, before facing the road once more, choosing to pipe down. She glances down at her phone, staring at it for a few seconds before grunting in frustration at what appeared to be a lack of reception. Quiet once again settled, before Jim, probably foolishly, began to speak once more.

"So, lady," Jim briefly asked.

She grunts, looking back towards the driver with a side-eye; "What?"

"How did you end up out here in the first place? Forgive me, but you do NOT look like you're from around here, not to mention you seem to not have a vehicle of your own."

"...Is it really that important for you to know," the stranger interrogated.

Jim shrugs: "Well, I guess for you it's important if you want to get out of here without my help, which you obviously hate."

The stranger hesitates, seemingly trying to think of what to say next. She runs her fingers through her hair before replying; "no... not at the moment, I don't," she says quietly, an

ever so slightly pensive look on her face appearing which Jim noticed, confusing him slightly:

"So, what happened, why don't you? Like, someone dropped you off or something?"

The stranger nods, looking out the window; "Y-yeah- well," the stranger stumbles over words, once again thinking of what to say for a few seconds, before continuing; "I was staying at the hotel in town overnight with some friends, and... I guess they left me behind. I've tried calling them, but they won't answer, or they're ignoring me deliberately. I don't know, but... I guess I'm stuck here until they come back."

Jim acknowledges this, growing ever-so-slightly sorry for the stranger's predicament, though something told him that it didn't seem much like the truth; small wonder why she seemed so snappy, he thought to himself: "Well, shit... I'm sorry to hear that, lady... Do you have any cash at all, or...?"

The woman shakes her head, gesturing to her phone; "Just this."

Jim thinks for a while, continuing to drive up the road, nearing the property, before he finally speaks again; "Well, look, if the situation is that dire for you, then..." he thinks again, before continuing, "Then I guess you're welcome to stay at my place, free of charge or rent or anything until you can get on to your-"

The stranger snaps her head at him again, glaring at him with a very suspicious look, before hesitating, thinking about it. She's quiet for a couple of seconds, before responding; "I'll think about it."

Jim nods, looking back to the road, before peering down the embankment to the right, noticing something in between the trees. He stops the car for a minute, peering down, his gaze fixated, and his brow furrowed.

The stranger notices the driver's sudden gaze, looking down towards the general direction; "What?"

"...I think that's Malloy down there," Jim said, getting out of the car.

The stranger darts her eyes down the embankment, seeing a person down in between the trees and bushes, before asking; "Is it?"

"I think so..." Jim replied quietly, finally getting out of the car and slamming the door shut, grabbing a rifle that he kept from behind him. He looks down in between the trees, before calling out, with the woman getting out as well, albeit cautiously.

"Oi, Malloy! Malloy, is that you," Jim calls out, his voice echoing down the embankment.

There was no reply.

"Malloy, you bastard, what the fuck are you doing down there," Jim reiterated, barking at the figure.

The woman stares down the embankment, squinting her eyes... "Oh shit, that is Malloy," the stranger whispers.

Suddenly, she rushes right down the embankment, running towards the figure!

"OI! WHAT THE FUCK- WHAT ARE YOU DOING!? GET BACK HERE," Jim bellowed, running down after the stranger, fearing for her safety! He rushes in between the trees, in awe of just how seemingly quick and skilled the stranger was through the thicket: "LADY! OI! WHAT THE FU- WHAT THE FUCK ARE... are you...?"

He stops, finding the woman standing before what he could confirm was, indeed, Malloy; albeit... dead. There he was, Victor Malloy, well-known local stalker, and "former" criminal, hanging from the tree branch with a noose around his neck. His brown shirt was ragged and torn, his loose jeans ripped, his shoes gone to reveal his left foot almost torn off, hanging by a thread of his bone. The stranger looks up at the now dead Malloy, speechless, and her hands on her hips, her gray hair in her face from all the running.

"What the fuck," the stranger exclaims, looking back towards a flabbergasted Jim.

"Yes, what the fuck! Why'd you run off like that!? He could've killed you," Jim spluttered, rifle in his hands.

She points up into the tree; "Well, obviously he can't now," she replied, looking back up at the body.

Jim shakes his head, looking up at Malloy's wretched face, which looked to have been beaten with a blunt-force object before he died. He examined Malloy's odd facial expression; his eyes were wide, his jaw wretched and open, as if he had died screaming, possibly terrified of his demise. Who had done it, he didn't know, but one thing was for sure; whoever did it obviously had a vengeance.

The stranger punches the tree, frustrated and angry for whatever reason; "FUCK!"

"I'm going to call this to the constable... this is bizarre," Jim states.

The stranger still stared at the body, her face still full of a seemingly odd rage and frustration, which puzzled Jim; why was she so upset that this son-of-a-bitch was dead? Did she want answers, seeming that she was a journalist? She'd make a poor journalist with how she was acting towards people close to her within a 10-foot radius, Jim thought to himself.

Jim begins walking back up to his Ute, followed by the stranger, still infuriated by this development. They soon arrive back at the Ute, Jim hopping back in, followed by the stranger getting in and slamming the door shut, her face wretched with anger. He was going to say something about her slamming the door, but decided against it, not wanting to be hit with abuse. The drive back into town was quiet, the stranger frustrated and seemingly deep in thought about not only her predicament, but as well as the newly dead Malloy.

Jim hesitantly broke the silence as he parked the Ute; "I'm heading into the police station here; you can get out if you'd-"

"Shut the fuck up," she abruptly mumbles, her gaze looking straight forward.

Jim is taken aback by this aggression but chose not to stoop down to her level of anger. He grunts, getting out of the car, watching as the stranger inside buries her head in her hands, sighing. He walks into the police station and reports the body. After a while of talking with Senior Constable Pearson, the local veteran Police Officer, Jim comes back out, finding the stranger sitting on the back of the Ute, looking up towards the ranges, facing away from him. He walks up towards the stranger cautiously, finding her with a blank expression, deep in thought.

"You alright," Jim asked cautiously, ready for the torrent of abuse and sarcasm.

As expected, the sarcasm came; "Just fucking fine and peachy," she replies.

Jim says nothing, looking towards the ranges with her, albeit from a moderate distance.

"So, like... you made your decision? You want to stay with me until your friends get back, or...?" Jim offers, still staring off into the horizon.

There is silence, before the stranger huffs, before quietly responding, seemingly not wanting to be heard too loudly; "Please...?"

Jim nods: "Alright, we'll head back."

Jim jumps back in, followed by the stranger getting in afterwards, ruffling her hair out of her face. He starts the engine and drives back home up the same way they came from. It was a bit of a drive, with peace and quiet filling the ambient sounds around them instead of torrents of abuse and sarcasm. At last, Jim slows down and pulls up into a gravel and dirt pathway to the left, up a small hill to approach a lovely looking single-storey timber house. It had a front balcony which stretched around the front, was painted a fine yellowish-off white with green borders for the windows, as well as a green front door, and a brownish-red tin roof. Jim parks the Ute inside a tin and steel shed adjacent to the house, where another car under a sheet was also parked.

He turns off the engine and grunts; "Welcome home," Jim remarks, with no reaction other than a blank glance by his passenger next to him.

Jim gets out and retrieved his rifle before entering onto the balcony, heading to the front door, followed by the stranger. He unlocks the door and gestures for the stranger to come inside, which she did, albeit with brief hesitation. The stranger observes how old, albeit pristine, the house was. They had just entered into a hallway, with a glass and timber cabinet to their left; this is where Jim kept his rifle and ammunition as well as some other personal photos and old-fashioned silverware, seemingly only for display. The floor was covered with a dark-red carpet, clean and well-kept.

There were a few doors to the left of the hallway all lined up, the first door being the one to Jim's bedroom, the next one over being one to a vacant spare bedroom, and the last one towards the end of the hallway being the bathroom, with an additional door at the very end of the hallway being one to a laundry. To the right of them, where Jim led the stranger through, was a large living area with an old-fashioned fireplace, a few lounge chairs, a couch, a dining table, some more cabinets, some of them empty, and a kitchen at the far end with a large window at the back for natural lighting.

"Well, here we are," Jim huffed. "Hope it's not too bad."

The stranger grunts: "Eh, it's alright for now, I guess," she replies, a blank expression still on her face, though she looked around with mild interest. She gestures to the hallway once again; "So, that middle door; that's my bedroom?"

Jim nods; "Yep."

The stranger nods; "Okay, cool, thanks."

The stranger then sits down on the couch, sighing, before pulling out a cigarette to the surprise of Jim.

"Hey, look, another thing," he interrupts, the stranger shifting her eyes towards him; "No smoking in the house, please. If you want to do that, there's a lounge chair outside for you."

The stranger rolls her eyes, before getting up and going outside, sitting down on the lounge chair.

Jim grunts, slumping down onto one of the lounge chairs in front of the fireplace, where there was a surprisingly high-tech modern thin-screen TV. He decides against turning it on, which he rarely did anyhow, and took off his broad-brim hat, resting it in his lap and looking at his own phone which he pulled from his side-table.

"Strange woman, she is," he thinks aloud to himself.

The rest of the afternoon was with little event, the 'strange woman' opting to stay outside on the balcony to watch the sunset. Occasionally, she would check her phone, perhaps to see if the internet was connected. On all occasions that she did use her phone, it didn't seem to want to connect to anything. This lack of connectivity or function would prompt the stranger to growl in frustration and swore from under her breath, before opting to just stare blankly into the horizon, "admiring" the view. Afternoon turned to night, with the strange woman now choosing to reside in her new bedroom, before Jim came in with a simple sandwich that he had made for her. At the time, she refused it, directing the owner of the house to simply 'put it on the dresser' next to the door, which he did so. With little more happening, after a while of peace and quiet, Jim opted to head to bed, announcing it to the stranger in the spare bedroom, who didn't answer, obviously already asleep herself. After a while of lying in his bed, with the moon reflecting its light on the horizon, Jim finally fell asleep.

Day 2

Jim woke up early, as he usually tended to do. He stretched briefly, cracking his knuckles before getting up, throwing on a robe he had before walking out through the doorway and to the living room, sitting down in his accustomed lounge chair in front of the TV. For a little while, Jim thought about this strange woman, about how she got where he found her, why she was dressed in an outfit unsuitable for the bushland and generally wild environment that she was walking through; a dark gray crop-top with black shorts, thigh-high leggings and a pair of shoes only really fit for an urban environment. Jim didn't think about it too much, though; who was he to judge, anyhow?

At long last an hour or so later, the strange woman walked into the living room, that blank expression still on her face. She pays him no mind, not even looking in his direction, before plopping herself down onto the couch, sitting upright, looking through her phone at something, still seemingly trying to connect to the internet with no success. She sighs heavily, throwing her phone onto the couch space next to her and runs her fingers through her hair.

Jim turned around, looking towards the stranger; "No luck yet, hey?"

The stranger shakes her head; "What do you think?"

Jim obviously took this as an abrupt 'no' and nods, getting up from his chair to make them both something to eat. The stranger watches him intently from the couch, obviously still suspicious of Jim's intentions. He chose to ignore her stare and made himself a bowl of cereal.

"What would you like on your toast," Jim asked the house guest, trying to be polite.

"Anything you got, I don't care, just don't you dare try to put anything in it," she warned bluntly, staring him down.

Jim shook his head; "I'm not going to do anything to you, mate."

"Is that right? And why should I trust you, then? I barely know you," she bluntly replied, glaring at him with a suspicious, piercing stare.

"Because if I wanted to do anything to you, I would've tried it yesterday! I wouldn't be making you bloody breakfast, either" Jim retorted, trying to gain her trust.

The woman just sighs, and looks out towards the sunrise; "Whatever, but I am watching you."

Jim opted to spread a bit of jam on the stranger's breakfast, placing it on a plate and presenting it to her. He proceeded to place it on the coffee table in front of the couch, to which the strange woman glared at it briefly before picking it up, examining it. She hesitated briefly before taking a small bite of it, holding it in her mouth, before at last being convinced that the food hadn't in any way been tampered with.

"See," Jim pointed out, sitting back down on the lounge chair, spinning it around to face his guest, "I wouldn't try anything with you, you'd eat me alive if I did."

The stranger stares at Jim with a blank yet judgmental expression, not humoured by his remark; "You got that right," she replied bluntly, swallowing her toast.

The room was quiet for a while, a long silence overwhelming the scene. This silence lasted until Jim opted to break it; "So, you want to head into town for the day? I got some shit that I have to do, and you can go do what you want, get what you want. I'll give you some cash to spend."

The lady shrugged, looking down at her plate; "Sure, whatever, I don't care."

Jim shrugged back; "Alrighty, we'll leave in a couple of hours, give you some time to prepare yourself."

The stranger replies with a simple emotionless "alright" before finishing her food and heading to the kitchen for some water.

Jim decides to try and start a conversation, which was probably a bad idea; "So, anyhow... What's your name? I'm Jim, by the way."

The stranger finishes her drink before staring with a piercing squint across from the kitchen at Jim, before getting straight to the point; "What makes you think I want to tell you anything about myself, Jim?"

Jim puts up his hand slightly; "Alright, alright, I'm sorry I even asked."

The strange woman grunts, finishing with a quiet "whatever" before heading back to her room, leaving him alone to wonder how this day would end up. The next couple of hours went just about the same; an attempt at interaction by Jim with his temporary tenant wherever he could, only to be met with suspicion and silence. Jim, despite her rude demeanor, didn't much blame her; how could you trust a stranger who welcomes you into his home from practically out-of-the-blue, as well as having no choice but to accept the invitation? Small wonder why this strange woman was so closed off with her surroundings.

After a little while, Jim was at last ready to head off. He notifies the stranger who was laying down on the couch, simply looking up to the roof. The stranger, however, doesn't answer. Jim shortly after heads outside to retrieve his vehicle from within the shed, leaving the doors open so he could back it out. After starting the Ute with a little bit of struggle due to its age, he slowly pulls it out onto the gravel and dirt pathway, with the stranger unexpectedly waiting for him, leaning on the side of the shed wall, one leg crossed over the other.

"Ah, you finally ready, are you," Jim calls out after manually rolling down the window.

"I'm here, aren't I," the strange woman replies before opening the passenger's side door and getting in; "Nice car, by the way," she adds quietly, looking away from him to the west.

"Ah, cheers," Jim replies before reaching into his wallet, pulling out a few fifty-dollar notes; "There's a hundred for you to spend if you need."

The stranger observes the notes and takes them off his hands, albeit with hesitancy; "Is there a catch?"

Jim shakes his head; "Nah, nah, no catch whatsoever. Only catch is that you spend what you want with it."

"Oh," the stranger replies; "Well... thanks, I guess?"

Jim replies with a simple "no worries" before making sure to lock the garage doors before putting the car in drive and heading for the main road. Soon enough, Jim along with his passenger accompanying him were heading into town. Any attempts of small talk were met with very brief answers. It was when the stranger gave Jim a stare that told him to "stop talking" that he gave up all attempts at polite conversation. Jim pulls into the town centre, pulling off to the side of the street to let his passenger out. The

stranger did so, sighing before getting back out, taking her (practically useless) phone with her.

"I'll be about an hour at most, I'll meet you back around here," Jim called out, the stranger's reply being a simple dull "got it" before he pulled off up the road a few minutes away.

Jim drove his Ute up to a warehouse located on the outskirts of town, where a man appearing to be in his mid-50s with black hair and wore only a navy-blue singlet, baggy work trousers and a pair of worn work boots was waiting for him.

"G'day, Roy," Jim called out, getting out of the Ute, and heading to the scruffy looking bloke's location.

"Morning, young fella," the man replied in return, "How's life, hey?"

"Ah, not too bad – working hard, hardly working," Jim replied, shaking Roy's hand, "So! I heard you got a job for me soon."

"Sure do, mate," Roy nodded, coughing a moment before regaining his composure; "Just the usual, yanno? Wild boar sighting south-east of here, big fuck-off pack of them. You got that Lee Enfield rifle with you, dontcha?"

"Absolutely I do," Jim nodded, "Just been serviced the other day, new parts, and all. Now, what was this about a big one I heard," the young man inquired, as Roy led him into his office, the interior of which only held a desk, an ancient computer which didn't work half the time, and a few chairs.

"It's rumours so far," Roy replied, sitting down on his office chair behind the desk, "But, they say he's around about four foot tall. He's massive! Haven't seen something that big since nineteen ninety-nine."

"Fuck," Jim exclaimed, kind of terrified of the prospect.

The rest of the conversation dragged on, mostly about business dealings. Roy, much like Jim, was a carpenter by trade and pig-shooter as a second job, mostly sniffing out leads for Jim to go after. How it worked, usually, was that Jim would hunt said boars down and bring them to Roy for cold storage until they could be shipped away by pest-control. The back-and-forth between employee and employer went on for ten minutes, until Roy changed the topic towards the end.

"Now, tell me, Jim; what's this about a young woman you found yesterday?"

"Oh, her? Yeah, nah, found her near my property down near the dried-up creek-bed. Half dead, she was, until I sped to Price's store, ended up saving her life," Jim explained, scratching his cheek.

"Good on ya, young fella," Roy applauded; "You've grown up a lot since you started working for me – you're more, let's say... considerate."

"Yeah, yeah," Jim replied, shaking his head, "I'm a much different bloke-"

Out of nowhere, Jim's phone started blaring loudly, interrupting the conversation. He reaches for his pocket, seeing who it was; an unfamiliar number, but one he swore he could almost recognise.

Jim exited the office, answering the phone; "Sorry, Roy, gotta answer this. Hello? Ah, Senior Constable, how's it going? ... Yeah? Yeah, I'm up the road, what's going on? ... Oh, shit, you're joking? ... Oh, for fu- okay, so-... In the station, okay, I'll be up there in a few minutes."

Jim stumbles right back into the office, a grim look on his face; "Sorry, Roy, gotta cut this short. Copper's want me up at the police station, that young woman's just had a fight and they've got her in the watchhouse."

"Bloody hell," Roy replies waving Jim off; "Alright, I'll see you this time next week."

Jim waved back before jumping right in his Ute and headed off back into the town centre. By the sounds of the very brief information he got, it sounded like there was an altercation between the stranger and a small group of young men who had tried something on her, which by the sounds of things ended in both groups being detained. At last, Jim parks in front of the station and briskly walks in towards the front desk, where the Senior Constable, who Jim had spoken on the phone to, was waiting for him. The sound of the strange woman yelling profanities at nobody in particular echoed in the distance in the holding cells.

"What's she gone and done," Jim asked the officer waiting for him.

"Nothing good," the officer said, shaking his head, "Gang of youths tried something foolish and there was a massive brawl between her and this small group of teens. One of them had a knife, and the young lady there almost broke his arm because of it. Lucky for her, we're going to let her off this time as it was self defense, but it still doesn't justify her non-cooperation and aggression. She said to call for you to pick her up."

Jim looks down, trying to make sense of the situation. He rubs the bridge of his nose and whispers something along the lines of "give me a break" before announcing his intention to bring her back "home." The Senior Constable obliges, and a few minutes later the strange woman is escorted to the front desk with an angered look in her eye that made Jim very uneasy.

Reluctantly, Jim leads the stranger back into the Ute, where she slumps back into the passenger's seat, her piercing gaze fixated in front of her. The drive back was eerily quiet, Jim being incredibly careful not to break the silence, fearing what would come if he did, directed at him or not. After what felt like an eternity, they finally arrived back home, the stranger still gazing in front of her with a mad look in her eye.

Cautiously, the driver gets out, saying nothing, followed by the stranger who got out and slammed the door shut with such force that it rocked the Ute a bit. Jim was going to say something once again, and almost did. But seeing how visually enraged the stranger was, that haunting deep scowl seemingly sitting permanently on her face, he decided not to add fuel to the fire. Jim made his way inside, the eerily quiet stranger behind him. Jim made his way into the kitchen, expecting the stranger to slump herself back onto the couch. Instead, she made a Beeline to the spare bedroom, slamming the door shut so hard that the reverberation made the entire house shudder.

This was the last straw for the homeowner who was sick of this situation already. He huffed in frustration, marching to the spare bedroom, calling out to the woman:

"Okay, that's it! Lady, I get it, you're furious – but for fuck sakes, that does NOT give you authority to tear down my hou-"

Jim was abruptly cut off before he could finish, hearing a sound that made his heart sink; from within the room, albeit muffled, Jim could hear the stranger give off heaving breaths, followed by a suppressed anguished sob.

Jim immediately ceased any other attempt to confront the clearly anguished stranger, shaking his head pitifully. The absolute hopelessness she must be feeling, Jim thought to himself, as he swore he could feel himself tearing up. It was enough to be stranded in a completely foreign location all alone without any way to contact the outside world, but then to have a fight that ends you up in police custody? It's too much.

Jim made his way outside, giving the stranger as much space as she possibly needed. After around half an hour of helplessly listening to the occasional sound of suppressed sobbing and ear-splitting cursing, the sound finally ceased to the slight relief of the homeowner. He slowly turned around, still in his seat, wondering if his tenant was as "okay" as she could possibly be. Jim thought of ways he could possibly help, resorting

to what he personally thought would grant her even the slightest of comfort. He walked into the kitchen and poured the strange woman a small glass of premium rum, finished off with ice and a few drops of coke.

Jim with the beverage in his hand made his way to the spare bedroom door and called out: "Hey, lady, you alright?"

There was no reply or sound.

Jim cleared his throat; "Hey, look... I brought you some rum and coke if you need it, help you cool down-"

"Leave it on the dresser in here, then leave me alone," the stranger abruptly called out, her voice shaky and sore presumably from her sorrow.

Jim, without saying another word, obliges, cracking open the door and slipping the drink onto the dresser. Without a moment more of delay, Jim shut the door and made his way back out onto the veranda, sitting back down on the lounge chair before tipping his broadbrim hat over his eyes. About ten minutes later, Jim hears the sound of creaking floorboards next to him, and the familiar sound of the second chair creaking from someone's weight. He lifts his hat off his head to be met once again with the strange woman who was looking down, her eyes partially red. Jim was about to say something before his tenant broke the silence for him:

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what," Jim replied, raising his eyebrow.

"Fucking- being all nice to me, giving me drinks, accommodating me – doing THAT," she bluntly replies, turning her head towards him with a squint.

"Matey," Jim began to explain; "You're a guest in my house. What's mine is yours, yeah? Now, as far as I am concerned, you are in a very bloody difficult spot – you've got nowhere to go at the moment, and it appears that your mates have forgotten about you, and it is my duty as someone who has voluntarily taken you in, to accommodate you."

The stranger shakes her head, obviously confused; "But what have I done to deserve ANY of this? I don't honestly like this whole generous bullshit you're doing – I hate being helped, I don't deserve any of it, and nor did I want it in the first place!"

"Oh, come off it," Jim refutes, throwing his hand up; "You're not as big, tough and mean as all that, I know you're not!"

The stranger scoffs, mocking Jim's attempt at understanding; "You know NOTHING about me!"

"Then let me learn something about you, for goodness sakes; you don't have to be so recluse," Jim retorts, half yelling.

The stranger tilts her head away slightly at an angle, still glaring at Jim with a judging expression. She holds this position for a few seconds, before she huffs, turning her head away fully before lighting a cigarette; "You'll learn soon enough that I'm not made of fucking rainbows and cotton wool."

Jim grunts: "Yeah, yeah," he replies, dismissing her callousness, as he begins shuffling through a collection of casings he had sitting on his lap.

These casings caught the attention of the stranger who stopped smoking and glared at the contents in Jim's hands with a hint of curiosity; "What's that?"

"Nothing, just some old CDs," Jim replies bluntly.

The stranger hesitates, leaning towards Jim and peering at one of the labels; "Is... is that Guns and Roses?"

"What, you know them, do you," Jim replies, looking back up at his now curious tenant.

"Know them?" She replies, almost incredulous; "I love them."

"Oh, is that right," Jim replies, raising his brow; "I've also got Metallica, AC/DC, uhm... some other metal bullshit that I've never listened to..."

"...You don't mind if... if I played one of them," the stranger quietly requested, not wanting to be heard too loudly pleading.

Jim nods his head and shrugs; "I don't mind at all, be my guest," he insists, handing her the stack of CD casings.

Immediately, Jim could see the strange woman's demeanor lighten up, moving her hair away from her eyes, seeming to at last find a hint of enjoyment in something. He smirks slightly, relieved to see his house guest moving away from being nothing but glum. Jim vanishes into the house briefly, returning with a portable CD player he had lying around. He hands it to the stranger who examined it, before promptly opening the disk slot and slipping one of the "Guns and Roses" CDs inside.

The device momentarily processed the contents of the CD before at last playing one of the tracks. The strange woman takes another brief pull of her cigarette before sitting back in her chair, appearing to be relieved to hear something that was, presumably, all too familiar and comforting to her.

Jim notices this, nodding his head very briefly before getting up; "Play them as many times as you like, I'll be in the garage," he announces, only to be met with a simple "okay" from his strange tenant.

The rest of the day until late afternoon was considerably more mundane; Jim doing his own thing as the stranger played track after track, at long last appearing to become comforted in something she genuinely found interest and familiarity in. At one point, Jim caught the stranger quietly singing along to some of the lyrics to his brief amusement, before ducking back into his garage to continue general maintenance on his Ute and other miscellaneous work. After a little while, Jim returned inside, the stranger since moved back to the comfort of her room to continue listening. From the sounds of things, the CD that was playing was at last approaching its ending track. Jim shuddered, noticing the sudden drop in temperature that was very much associated with the absolute chaos that was the local weather at times.

After a quick shower and slipping into his pajamas and his robe, he prepared a meal for both of them; nothing special, just some potatoes, lamb, and a bread roll. The sun had set earlier than usual and by 6:30PM, it was fully dark outside, only the light on the veranda illuminating, although failing to illuminate anything further than the boundaries of the home. They both sat at the table, Jim on one end and the stranger on the exact opposite. He didn't expect much from the strange woman in the way of talking, observing how she merely stared at her plate, avoiding eye contact. She ate slowly, seeming to enjoy it, though her blank stare and slightly raised brow wasn't much to go by. Jim did the same, though a minute or so in, the unexpected happened:

"Apologies for slamming your door," the stranger said quietly, taking a sip of water.

Jim looked up, slightly surprised; "Pardon?"

"Apologies for slamming your door," the stranger repeated, glancing up from her plate, "I was just-... well, I think that officer explained it to you well enough."

Jim blinked, not expecting this much interaction from her at all; "Oh- Okay? Apology accepted, mate, I understand. So, tell me, what happened?"

The stranger looked up, adjusting her spiked choker before answering; "Alright, so... I was coming out of that clothing store near the gas station, and there's this small group of

younger men, right, probably no more than twenty by the looks of it. They come up to me, asking if they could, as they put it, "show me a good time". I told them to fuck off, one of them pulled out a knife, so I smacked it out of his hands, bend his arm back and pinned him to the floor."

The stranger began to laugh slightly, recalling this turn of events; "The other three literally shit themselves and took off running, playing victim and all that! Luckily I had witnesses!"

Jim couldn't help but chuckle himself, shaking his head; "Fucking ratbags, yeah I'm familiar with who they are. But then I understand you got aggressive with the Coppers?"

The stranger nodded; "Yeah, I did. But, hey, as I'm sure you know by now, I'm a bit of a recluse and also just generally intolerable to bullshit; I was raging."

Jim acknowledged this with a grunt; "Oh, I'm sure, but I know Constable Pearson; they're a good bunch of blokes, they just wanted to help you out. Being all aggressive towards them only makes their job harder and your situation worse."

The stranger nods, seeming to agree after thinking on the notion, a slight look of realization appearing on her face. The room momentarily filled with nothing but the sound of a distant truck passing by, before the stranger spoke again:

"So, like, how'd you get that, uh, "Ute" of yours, as you keep calling it?"

"Oh, that one," Jim replied, "Got it from my dad. He used to drive it, but one day stopped due to health issues. There was no way in hell he was going to sell it, so he handed the ownership and the keys over to me completely."

"Huh, that's nice," the stranger simply replied, prodding at her food with a fork.

"What about you," Jim continued; "What about your parents?"

The stranger froze, still looking down at her plate, presumably in thought on how to respond. She sniffs, looking back up; "I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand," Jim reassures, finishing his food. He eats the last of his bread roll before wiping his mouth, getting up to dump his plate in the sink.

From the confines of the kitchen, Jim continued his attempted small talk; "So, lady, tell me; you got a place of employment?"

"I guess," the stranger responds, slowly finishing the last of her lamb which she saved for last.

"What is it," Jim asks, curious.

The stranger seemingly hesitates; "Oh, nothing, I just help out at a... butcher. Y-yeah, a butcher."

Jim raises his brow, genuinely curious; "Is that right? What do you do there," he asks, washing his plate.

The lady huffs, shrugging; "Oh, you know, just... being surrounded by, you know, blood and all that kinda shit."

Jim chuckles from across the room; "Yeah, I get the gist of it. I used to be one when I was around sixteen. Only lasted six months because I wanted to pursue my dad in carpentry and pig shooting, just general hands-on stuff."

"And butchering wasn't enough," the stranger queried, looking towards the kitchen as she made her way over with her now empty plate.

"Nah, not for me," Jim confirms, washing both plates and leaving them out to dry.

The stranger grunts before heading off to the bathroom for a shower. After a few minutes, she emerges, now wearing a set of her own pajamas she bought moments before her incident with the local thugs. She stretches before notifying the homeowner that she would be in her room before doing so, closing the door behind her, not to emerge until the next morning.

Jim stays up a little while before heading to bed himself, but not before making a detour to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He looks down at the sink to find a curious discovery; In the basin of the sink was a small patch of what appeared to be hair. He picks it up cautiously, examining it; originally he assumed it was just from the woman's long gray hair, but this was ruled out slightly when he noticed that there was also dark grayish-black hair in the bundle as well. He shrugs, not taking too much note of it before throwing it in the bin, before finally brushing his teeth and making a beeline straight to bed.

Day 3

The time was around about seven in the morning, with Jim's tenant at last waking up. She made her way into the kitchen and made herself a bit of toast with jam, much like what she had the day before. She eats it slowly, this time now convinced that nothing in the man's house was designed to do any harm to her. The stranger sits alone for a while, waiting for Jim to emerge from the bedroom. An hour had passed, and Jim still hadn't emerged. The tenant grew curious, getting up to head to his room before Jim waltzed his way back from outside, wearing a bright-blue button-up shirt, a pair of beige trousers and his Williams boots, topped off with his accustomed broadbrim hat.

"Was wondering when you'd get up," Jim smiled, taking off his hat and hanging it on his hatstand.

"I thought the same," his tenant replied, "Where were you?"

"Oh, matey, I'm an early riser. Was down at the front, just finishing repairing my fence; got a few more pillars and meters to do yet," Jim informed before pouring himself a tin-can of black tea he had made earlier, sipping it briefly.

"I assume you're not planning on doing much today," Jim continued; "Maybe I'll teach you something today if you'd like, keep you from boredom seeming your phone is being stubborn, not wanting to connect and all. How do you feel about carpentry?"

The woman shrugs; "I dunno, really. Haven't ever tried it."

"Never too late to learn, hey? You can bring them CDs and stuff, have something playing in the background," Jim invited, before making his way to the bathroom to wash his face from the grime.

"...Sure," the woman replied hesitantly, not necessarily feeling like doing much; "I'll get dressed first then I'll meet you down there."

Jim replied with a simple "right you are" before making his way back out the house and down the pathway, this time bringing a collapsible folding table with him. After a little while, the stranger made her way down to the entrance of the property, finding Jim with a stack of Timber Pillars and a roll of fencing wire, a large hammer in his hands. He swung the hammer down a few times on the top of the pillar, driving it down firmly into the ground. The stranger approaches Jim who noticed her presence, waving her over.

She put the CD player and CD casing she had down on the folding table and wandered over; "What are you doing here?"

"Fencing," Jim explains; "Gotta do this exact same thing from here to that pillar over there," he details, pointing over to a pillar a good few meters away.

The stranger nods, examining the work he was doing; "So, uh... what do you want to force me to do?"

"Force you," Jim repeats, "It's your choice if you want to do something. If you want to, emphasis on "want," I'll let you drive one of these pillars in."

"Alright," the stranger agrees, watching as Jim finishes driving the pillar into the ground before retrieving another one from the pile, bringing it over to another hole in the ground.

He slips the new pillar into the hole, checking to see if everything was aligned with a yellow spirit level he had bought from the shed, alongside his other equipment. After confirming everything was lined up, he hands the large sledgehammer to the stranger who picked it up, not expecting the sheer weight of it.

"Shit, this is heavy," she exclaimed to the amusement of Jim.

"It has to be," Jim explained, bringing her over to the newly established pillar, helping her rest the business-end on the top of said pillar, ready to swing.

"Alright," Jim began, gesturing to the sledgehammer's handle; "You've got to swing it back gently, over your shoulders like so, then you swing it as hard as you can back over your shoulder directly on the top of the post. You only have to do it, say, two or three times."

"Got it," the stranger replies, before Jim steps a few feet back, not being in the mood to suffer a blow from a hammer coming full force at him.

The stranger eyes the post before huffing, heaving the sledgehammer over her shoulders, managing to smack the centre of the post with a loud "thud!" as it was driven further into the ground! She swung the hammer back over her shoulders, carefully eyeing the target before repeating the same swing; "THWACK!" In just two swings, the stranger had managed to sink the pillar to a perfect level.

Jim scratches his head, satisfied with his "apprentice's" performance; "Bloody Norah, you're good at this."

"Yep," the stranger simply replies, moving on to the next pillar, steadying herself; "You could say I've had a bit of practice in the past."

"How so," Jim queried, watching as the woman smacked the hammer down once again on the next pillar with admirable strength and precision; "You worked on properties like this before?"

The woman shrugs, grunting as she rests herself for a bit, leaning on the hammer as support; "I did visit a house once, it looked like this one, though I didn't do much work. It was with a friend's family who did this kind of stuff, though they were more ranch owners than anything; I just sort of tagged along for the sake of it."

"Ah, righto," Jim acknowledged, noticing as a police car came casually pulling up to the property from a distance.

The woman, too, stopped what she was doing, watching the car pull up with suspicion and a hint of concern. The car stopped on the driveway, and a singular officer, the Senior Constable from the day before, hopped out and made his way towards Jim and his tenant.

"Oh, Senior Constable," Jim called out; "What's up?"

"G'day, Jim," the bald-headed and aging officer replied, "I'm still alive, don't worry. Look, I'll get straight to the point, I wanted to talk to you about Victor Malloy."

The strange woman sighed, relieved that she was not the subject matter. Jim leaned in, speaking with the Senior Constable. The stranger got back to work, moving on to the second last pillar, the conversation between the homeowner and officer out of her earshot. What she could hear, however, was brief snippets of how the "coroner is baffled" and that "there's no suspects" or something like that. At last, she moved in on the last pillar, drilling it in hard with two hammer blows, before she walked back towards the two men as the conversation finally ended:

"I'll get you to come down tomorrow morning to fill in some 'witness paper' stuff – you know, just for bureaucracy's sake and all that," the officer addressed Jim, before turning towards the strange woman approaching him; "And you, you're behaving yourself, are you?"

This comment took her slightly aback, perhaps taking it a bit too literally; "I'm not going to cause any more problems, nor did I; I was defending myself," she bluntly replied.

The officer waves his hand in dismissal, smiling; "Nah, don't worry about it, just commenting," he replied, before saying his "good mornings" before getting back in his car and driving back into town.

Jim turned back towards the stranger as he picked up the spool of fencing wire, wearing a pair of protective gloves; "Did you hear that? They got no idea how Malloy died or who killed him, other than the obvious," Jim informed his "apprentice"; "They first thought it was the hanging that killed him, then the wound to his leg, or the beatings. Coroner says it's as if he died before he was even hung up and beaten, like he died of shock or something like that, they don't know."

The stranger nods intently, raising one eyebrow; "You don't say?"

Jim shakes his head; "Yep. It's a strange one. I've got to go in tomorrow to fill out a witness statement."

The stranger nods once more: "Alright, cool," she replies, watching as Jim began threading the wire in between the posts, at last finishing the job he had started; "So, I take it your dad taught you how to do all this," Jim's tenant assumed, swiping her gray hair away from her face from all the swinging.

"No, not this," Jim corrected; "I had to figure out how to do fencing myself. My old man merely did general timber work like construction and all that, wasn't necessarily a fencer."

The woman nodded in acknowledgement, shielding her eyes from the sunlight; "argh, this fucking sun!"

"Don't worry, we'll be out of the sun in a minute," Jim assured his tenant; "Almost done with this blasted wire. You can go back up to the garage and I'll meet you there if you'd like."

The strange woman hesitates, dusting her dark gray shorts from some of the settled dirt on them; "Hmm... no, I'll follow you. I don't usually say this about much, but... I find this

cool."

Jim turns to the woman after finishing the last bit of wire and begins to pack everything away; "Oh? And here I was thinking you hated this place, and everything associated with it."

The strange woman scoffs: "Never said anything about LIKING it here, just that what you're doing is cool to watch. Personally, using that sledgehammer was fun – was like taking my frustration out on something, or someone, that had done wrong against me, and I was smashing it's puny pathetic little..."

The stranger stops, realizing what she was letting slip, before looking back up from her thoughts to find Jim with his gear, staring at her with a dumbfounded yet concerned look on his face; "You scare me, lady."

The woman coughs, voluntarily helping with folding up the small portable table; "forget what I said."

Jim happily obliged as they both made their way back up to the corrugated iron and steel garage next to Jim's house. The stranger had a proper look inside, examining everything; Of course, there were Jim's two cars, but further in was a large workbench, a variation of tools and equipment stored on the walls, some stacks of timber neatly piled in the corner for future use, and permanent fixtures such as a drop-saw on the workbench.

"Either you're a serial killer or a construction worker," the stranger remarked, smiling at her own joke.

Jim chuckles, smiling back towards her; "Who's to say I'm not both?"

The stranger rolled her eyes at this attempt at a comeback before closely examining the surroundings, finding an odd fascination in the place. She finds a surprising photograph on the wall; in the photo was what appeared to be a younger version of Jim standing shoulder-to-shoulder with an older man who could possibly be assumed to be his father, standing in front of a large concert hall amongst a crowd of people. From the smaller details of the photo in the background, the stranger could tell that the venue in question was holding a "Guns n' Roses" concert, the photo dated back to around 2016.

The stranger's eyes lit up; "Dude, no fucking way! You did NOT go to a Guns n' Roses concert!"

Jim laughs, putting his gear away as he did; "I sure did! Went with my old man, as you can see. He won the tickets in a bet with his mates."

"No kidding. Fuck, you're lucky as hell," the stranger exclaimed, practically overcome in jealousy.

"Yeah, my dad's a good old man," Jim went on to explain, continuing to put his equipment away in their respective places; "He did his best for me when he could, although I was a rough-head little bastard. Sometimes, with foresight, I get all guilty when thinking about all the shit I put him through with my antics and my snarky attitude half the time. I was an ungrateful little shit, well at least I recognise it now. Sometimes I used to push him away whenever he used to show me affection, which I now really feel guilty about because, well, he always tried his best for me, and..."

Jim paused, finding the stranger looking a bit pensive with herself, her eyes holding a kind of slight guilty sadness within them. She turned to look back outside, wiping her eyes slightly.

Immediately after noticing this, Jim grew concerned; "You alright there," he asked, softening his voice.

"Hm? Oh, y-yeah, I'm fine," the stranger replied, trying to play it off.

Jim's brow furrowed, feeling sorry for the woman; It was obvious she was guilty about something related to what he was talking about, and he had his suspicions on what it was, though chose not to press his tenant on the matter, which was probably for the best. After locking his gear away and a general inspection of his equipment, Jim's tenant and himself left the confinements of the garage, not much else left to be seen in there.

The strange woman looked on into the horizon, that earlier pensive look in her eyes, though Jim could tell she was trying her hardest to suppress it. Suddenly, she asks him a most unexpected question:

"Do you ever get lonely living out here, well, you know... alone," Jim's tenant inquired, looking at him with genuinely curious eyes.

Jim thinks for a minute, staring off towards the horizon, off into the direction of the town centre. He stands there next to her, silently, sniffing slightly and nodding his head. Before he could think of what he was doing, he opened up; "Sometimes, I do. Every now and then I get the odd visitor, but, well, it's no social life. Like, I got mates and a healthy social life, but, well... it's not like I get many mates or anyone properly over for

dinner or such. Who'd want to, anyway, with a dullard like me? It's not like I have anything particularly interesting up here."

"...I think you're interesting," the stranger said, a blank expression on her face, her grey hair slightly blowing in the gentle crisp Australian air.

Jim chuckles, looking at her with his hands in his trouser pockets; "Oh, come off it, you're just saying that."

The lady hesitates, sighing briefly before turning back towards Jim from examining the 'Guns n' Roses' CD she had with her.

"No, seriously, just listen," she abruptly replies; "I was hoping you wouldn't hear that, but you've put me on the spot now so, fucking- just listen; You actually are, okay? Like, come on, you live out in a house like this, away from much of the bullshit, and, well... it's peaceful out here. I don't like admitting shit like this because I feel vulnerable if I say it out loud, but you've put my nerves at ease these last two or so days with your generosity. You've done so much, even if you are slightly fucking annoying sometimes with your constant talking and ordering me around like I'm your slave."

The tenant hesitates, glancing at Jim with a deeply serious expression, who was listening to her carefully. She clears her throat from it being slightly dry before continuing: "As I am sure you know by now, I'm usually straight to the point, so let me get straight to the point with you; At the moment, I'm stranded here, okay? I'm stuck. I am stuck, and you're the only one I can at least put half of my trust in around here. Okay, that's all I wanted to say – at the moment, you've gained my trust."

Jim froze, processing what she was saying, before nodding in acknowledgement; "I understand, and I'm glad I've been able to," Jim solemnly replies, smiling briefly at her before scratching his chin in thought.

The woman doesn't answer, merely staring off at nothing in particular, beginning to like the serenity of being away from it all. She sighs, turning around and deciding to rest under a tree which was providing adequate shade.

"I'll be here listening to this," she informs the homeowner, gesturing at the CD player; "I want some time alone."

Jim nods; "All good," he solemnly responds, walking back towards the house for a sit down on the veranda. Every now and then, he glances back towards the stranger who was zoned out, listening to the contents of the CD in the distance, still under her tree. The stranger then sighs, tucking her knees in her arms. Even from the distance she

looked somber and alone; not necessarily in the physical sense, but her state of mind. Still, Jim was glad that she felt safe for the time being.

The rest of the day dragged on, Jim digging and carving a block of wood using his knife as the tenant stayed silent, obviously not wanting to talk much more. Occasionally, she'd come up to him and ask what the time was before making her way to the kitchen to get herself something to eat, usually coming back out to rest under the tree. Day turned to night with little interaction between Jim and his house guest, the aforementioned guest announcing that she was going to have an early night at around about 6:45PM. Jim acknowledges this, completely understanding.

Day 4

With an absolute killer of a back, Jim wakes up from his bed. He groans, feeling his back ache horribly. With a bit of struggle, he manages to sit himself upright, flexing his shoulders and neck before getting up.

"Bloody mattress, "Jim whines, before walking out of his room and back into his accustomed living room, into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee; he would need it for today, after all.

He puts the water to boil before deciding to go wash his face. He walks past the stranger's bedroom, noticing that she hadn't gotten out yet, as he could hear her just waking up. He waltzes his way into the bathroom, just about to wash his face, before he notices a familiar sight. Jim froze, taking a closer look; sure enough, there was a small clump of hair resting in the bathroom sink, the all too familiar white and dark-gray hair making its presence known. He picks it up, like the last specimen, narrowing his eyes.

Just as he took a closer look, the stranger finally made her way out of her bedroom, stretching her arms behind her head, before she noticed Jim about to ask her something. She froze, staring at him; "What?"

"Hey, matey, do you know where this has come from," Jim asks, genuinely curious, holding the little hairy clump in his hand.

The stranger stares at him, hesitating a bit, before answering; "Nope. I, uh... I don't know what that is."

Jim raises his eyebrow; "You sure? Because stuff like this appearing has only happened since you got here," Jim refutes, trying to get to the bottom of whoever was leaving it behind.

The stranger merely shakes her head, once again "confirming" that she was not the culprit; "Look, can you not interrogate me as soon as I get up," the stranger grunts.

Jim throws in the towel; "Sorry, sorry, just asking."

"Yeah, well," the stranger hesitates, trying to take the knots out of her hair with a brush she brought into her room; "stop asking so much."

Jim shrugs, at last washing his face and brewing his coffee. Jim opts to sit on the balcony, listening as his tenant once again begins playing some of the CDs; it was her only form of entertainment due to her phone being rendered useless with no connection, after all. A little while passes, the stranger opting to make her own breakfast again. Jim half expected her to make breakfast for him in generosity, though this hope was short lived when the tenant, smirking, responded with a simple yet blunt; "make it yourself, you grown ass man."

After making and eating his breakfast with the "help" of his "companion", Jim gets himself dressed for the day, as usual wearing his usual clothing. He puts on his hat, announcing that he would be leaving for a couple of hours. The stranger acknowledges with a mere "meh", preoccupied with listening to her music and having a nap.

An hour has passed, and by this time, Jim had driven himself in his accustomed "workhorse", doing as promised and heading to the police station to fill out his official 'witness statement'. After having to deal with a few piles of paperwork and legal agreements, Jim makes his way by foot further into town to buy some general goods he needed; polish for his Ute, a few bits of canned food like beans and the like, Engine Oil, and as a bit of an afterthought, a pair of new socks.

After being satisfied that he had everything he needed, Jim makes his way back to his car, turning the key, allowing the vehicle to roar back to life. For a bit of a longer drive, Jim decided to take the back roads for more of a scenic tour. His Ute makes its way up the winding dirt road, bumping around on the uneven track. He was admiring the view until the Ute began to lose power, spluttering and unable to accelerate.

"No... no, fuck off, come on... SHIT," Jim exclaims as he was forced to pull off to the side of the uneven dirt road.

He gets out in a huff, his hands on the side of his hips, thinking on what to do next. With a little bit of thinking and a lot more swearing, Jim opts to do the only thing he could. He grabs his keys, locks the car and walks home. Jim, at long last, arrived back to his property, cursing to himself about having to walk for a good fifteen minutes back to his house to retrieve his run-down lemon to tow his beloved, now disgraced, eighties

workhorse back home. He thought about this begrudgingly as he walked, deeply frustrated; this train of thought, however, was lost after he observed, albeit for a moment, an incredibly strange animalistic shape walking through his front door and into his home. He froze, trying to process what exactly he had just momentarily seen, only able to catch its back before it invited itself in. Then he realised that the lady must still be in the home with whatever this creature was, which terrified him.

Without a second more thought, he called out with a weary, booming voice: "Oi, lady! Lady, listen to me; something large and animal-looking has just wandered into the house! I want you to stay as still and as low as possible!"

Slowly but surely, Jim made his way inside, keeping as quiet as possible, retrieving his Lee Enfield Rifle from his cabinet next to the entrance door. He took two clips with ten rounds each, loaded one in, and made his way through the house, his rifle drawn.

He made his way into his bedroom, the closest room to the entrance: nothing. Next, he trudged his way into the woman's bedroom: nothing. Then, into the bathroom: nothing in sight. He was just about to make his way into the laundry at the end of the hallway before he heard floorboards creaking and a harsh gasp emanating from in the living room; the room right next to him. He drew his rifle, steadying his breath. He stood as upright as he could, and with the greatest amount of caution, walked straight into the living room.

What greeted Jim was the most terrifying and bizarre creature that he had ever seen in his life, standing motionlessly, peering with wide scarlet eyes at him. Jim froze in awe and terror, observing whatever the fuck he was looking at. His eyes wide, his jaw locked shut, and his palms sweating profusely, gripping onto his rifle tightly. Everything was silent, until the thing spoke:

"Now, Jim... please, d-don't panic... j-just stay calm, and we can talk ab-"

Suddenly, Jim drew his rifle, aiming directly at the thing's face! The creature gasped, lurching at him! The creature then grabbed Jim's rifle before he could pull the trigger and threw it away from his hands with unmatched strength, making him yell in terror! Jim slammed into the floor from the might of the creature's strength, stumbling back into a corner and pulling out his knife kept in his pocket, his throat hurting from all of his terrified incoherent yelling! He tried lurching at the creature which was begging for him to "calm the fuck down and listen", which was no use, as like his rifle, the knife was smacked from his hands, before this bizarre bipedal pinned him to the ground! This terrifying beast looked him straight in the eye, begging him for cooler heads to prevail!

"FUCK! GET THE FUCK OFF ME! GET OFF," Jim bellowed, struggling with all his might but to no avail. At this point, his nerve broke, tears of fear for his life beginning to run down the sides of his face.

"Listen to me, you dumb bastard, it's me! It's the stranger you saved from the creek, just listen, for fuck sakes, ple-" The creature's plea was cut off as Jim managed to punch it one in its face, making it lurch back in pain, allowing Jim to back himself into a corner, retrieving his rifle and aiming it directly at the creature!

"WHAT ARE YOU!? WHAT DO YOU WANT!?"

"Fuck sakes, I told you! It's me! I'm that woman you saved!"

"Like shit, you are! You're a freak and affront to life is what you are," Jim bellowed, shaking violently.

"Oh, for shit sakes- I told you to listen! Look, it's me, I can prove it," the creature pointed to its left forearm, spreading its fur to reveal a puncture-like wound, like a needle point.

"SEE," the creature bellowed, "It's me! This is where that fucking needle went, from the Doc! Fuck, don't you remember?"

Jim looked intently at the small scar, calming down ever-so-slightly to observe the evidence. He stared into the creature's eyes, his mouth slightly agape: "S-shit... t-this is you, lady? Is that really you?"

"No, it isn't, it's the landlord, I'm here to evict you; of course, it's me, you dumbass," the thing remarked back.

Jim lowered his rifle to his side, breathing deeply, thinking on what to say next to an already fucked up situation. He fumbled onto his feet, using his rifle as a crutch: "R-right- I see-... What the fuck, I knew there was something odd about you, I fucking knew it!"

Jim was shaking badly, his nerves shot and his joints aching from his efforts to break free mere moments ago. He tried to get back up onto his feet, only to stumble back onto his behind, prompting the creature to try to slowly approach him. This attempt to help him only prompted Jim to briefly aim the rifle back towards the creature, glaring at it with a stern and terrified look. He coughed a bit, finally gaining his balance again, before speaking once more:

"Now, tell me," Jim demanded urgently, "What exactly are you, lady? In fact, no, you haven't even told me your fucking name, and I've known you for, what, three, four days now?"

The creature stood frozen, trying its best to ease the situation. It stood down, raising its hands into a deescalating stance, showing Jim that it had no intention of causing him any harm.

"You're not going to believe me, but I'm a... look, I'm a hellhound-" the thing explained, before being abruptly cut off by the nervous man on the opposite side of the room.

"A fucking what? You better not be pulling my leg, matey, because if you are, I will turn your head into a fine mist!"

"I'm not, for fuck sakes! I mean, look at me! You really think I'm anything other than that," the thing barked right back, almost incredulous at his question.

Jim hesitated, looking at this mean-looking son-of-a-bitch up and down, still trying to come to terms as to what in this blessed world has wondered into his home, or rather what has been living in his home for the betterment of a couple of days:

"N-no... No, I don't...," Jim admitted, now reasonably calmer than he was seconds ago. "Now, for goodness sakes, your name! What's your name? If you at least tell me your name, maybe you'll regain my trust in you that bit more, deal?"

The beast sighs, her helplessness in the current situation very much stressing her out; if this was anyone else pointing an ex-military weapon at her face, they'd be dead already. She loosens her nerves to the best of her ability, and answers with a gulp:

"Okay, okay! Okay, I'll tell you, just- for fuck sakes, just don't shoot me... Loona, that's my name. There, you happy now?"

Jim nodded slightly and rigidly, his eyes still fixated firmly on the woman: "Loona... r-righto, so that's your name... I-it's a pretty name, I'll give you that much..." Jim swallowed with his dry throat, his throat still sore from his panicked animalistic yelling moments before. He takes a swig of a whiskey bottle next to him, his palms still shaking. He swallows it quickly with a brief cough afterwards, and asks his next question, perhaps the most important:

"So, tell me, lady, and you tell me honestly... you're not going to kill me, are you?"

The woman huffs; "Fucking- no! I'm not going to kill you!"

"Is that fuckin' so? How can I trust you, huh," Jim demands, staring down the beast.

"Because if I wanted to, I would've already done so. Like, shit, you saw how easily I overwhelmed you a minute ago," the beast replies, frustrated with the slow progress being made to deescalate the situation; "Besides, you saved my life! Now, why would I want to kill someone who literally saved my life?"

Jim hesitates, feeling himself calm down, lowering his aim once more towards the floor; "Nah... nah, you make a good point, there. Now, please... here's the deal; I'll put down my rifle, and you sit down in that chair there, yeah? I will sit down, too- We'll both do it at the same time- BUT- and I cannot stress this enough, we will do it slowly."

The woman nods; "Okay, deal."

Both parties begin to slowly make their moves collectively; the woman sitting down, and Jim lowering his rifle next to the chair adjacent to him. After the woman had fully sat down, Jim, too, sat down in his respective chair. They both relaxed significantly, though not enough to reduce the tension completely from the air.

The room was silent, only the faint buzzing of the light in the living room interrupting the tense situation. A fly hung about the woman's head, making her ears flick from the buzzing. She observed Jim, his left leg bouncing, his posture tense within the chair he sat in. Small beads of sweat gathered on his forehead as he wiped them away with his fingers.

"Shit... shit, this is unreal, this is some absolute... I don't know..." Jim spluttered, looking once again towards the lady adjacent to him, a couple of feet away.

"Hey, look," the lady replied, fully turning her head towards Jim, "I get it; I'm scary looking, I understand- and I guess I understand as to why you pointed a rifle at my face. But look, I'm not going to harm you in ANY way."

Jim's gaze darted to meet hers: "I guess-... guess that's obvious now, and I'm glad." Jim was considerably calmer now, though a hint of disbelief and fear still rang out in his voice.

Jim wrapped his fingers against the armrest, before asking his next question: "So... so why are you here in the bloody first place, something like... you?"

"Would you believe that I was after Victor Malloy," the woman asked, shooing the persistent fly away with her hand.

Jim scoffed once more; "Hey, look, I reckon I can believe anything at this point. What, you wanted to kill him?"

The creature pointed her finger at Jim, snapping her fingers as well; "Congrats, you figured it out."

Jim half-laughed, wiping the sweat from his brow, getting increasingly calmer, yet still tense: "Well, I suppose you missed the chance, then; fucker's dead, as we discovered. So, I guess you can, well... go back now?"

The hellhound froze briefly, her brow furrowing with concern: "Well... for whatever reason, I can't. I don't know why, but I can't manage to, and no – not by a car or anything like that, something more supernatural if you know what I mean. I don't think anyone can get to me either for whatever reason. You know, the ONE time I go out on a job, and fucking- I get stuck like this, a literal worse case scenario! I've tried everything, but... well, I'm stuck here, for the moment I guess, w-with you." She looked down, her face growing slightly pensive and concerned, her voice growing quieter.

Jim turned to the concerned hellhound, feeling somewhat sympathetic; "Well... I'm sorry to hear, I suppose. Sucks to be away from home, I get it. But look, I know we barely know each other next to a bar of soap, but you've got a temporary home here, I suppose if you look at it that way."

The woman nods slightly, looking back up with a slightly worried expression: "S-sure... I suppose so... and, well... I want to thank you for that... a-and for finding me in that creek. Oh, and-... I don't ask this often, but... say sorry to Dr. Price for me, for being abrupt."

Jim laughed, waving his hand slightly; "Nah, he doesn't care, really; he's had much worse things said and done to him over the years. I get it, though, so I'll let him know."

The woman nodded slightly, thanking him. They both sat in brief silence, before Jim offered the woman a glass and his whiskey bottle. The woman obliged, taking both containers, and pouring herself a glass.

Jim rubbed his back: "Ah, bloody Norah, my back... fell hard there, didn't I? Thanks to you practically body-slamming me into the ground there."

The hellhound huffs, looking back over to him; "You had a literal gun and a knife, I had to," she explained with a small grin, taking a swig from the bottle, discarding the glass.

Jim laughed; "Nah, that's fair enough..." he took a sip from his glass of whiskey he had resting in his lap before resting it in his fingers, coughing from the strength of the beverage he had drunk down like clear crystal water from a fountain.

"Wait a second... so THAT's why I've been finding fur in my ruddy bathroom sink," Jim remarked, turning back towards the lady with a smirk.

Loona smirked in return, her brow raised slightly; "Yep, that would be me. I would say I'm sorry for that, but I'm not," she smugly remarked, finishing the contents of the near-empty whiskey bottle.

Jim rolled his eyes; "Yeah, nah, whatever you say," he remarked in return, finishing his glass.

The both of them sat in silence, Jim taking the empty whiskey bottle from Loona and discarding it to the coffee table that was between them. Loona, meanwhile, briefly checked what appeared to be her phone, scrolling through with that familiar look of pensiveness in her eyes.

This caught Jim's curiosity: "Ey up, what's that then?"

Loona glanced at him briefly with a blank stare; "Just my phone."

Jim raised his eyebrows, curious; "What are you looking at?"

Loona rolled her eyes and sighed: "Just photos. What, you want to look at my personal shit?"

Jim held up his hand; "No, no, I was... just curious, you know?"

The hound hesitated for a minute, looking at Jim in thought. She maintained her gaze before speaking again; "You know what? Sure, if it means that much to you. No shitty remarks about them, though, ok," she demanded.

"Of course," Jim swore, "You have my word."

Loona hesitated once more, gesturing for him to come over, albeit begrudgingly. Jim does so, still with a sore back, and stands next to her, looking over. The hound shows him a picture that peaks his curiosity, but not before being briefly startled with the contents; in the centre of the photo was Loona herself, surrounded by three other equally strange looking individuals. He squints, studying the unusual nature of the article.

"I take it these are your folks," Jim inquires, baffled even more in an already baffling situation.

Loona huffs, letting out a brief titter: "Hah, no, not in relation anyway. They're kinda... like associates, I guess, though I tolerate them."

Jim chuckles for a moment: "Nah, I know what you mean. I have a few of those types myself I have to deal with."

Loona nods in acknowledgement: "Yep. Hey, at least someone gets it. Although they're just associates, sometimes they feel like family."

Jim grunts, acknowledging the information; "So, they mean that much to you, hey?"

Loona hesitates slightly, thinking about it: "Yeah, I suppose so. They tolerate me, and I tolerate them; I'm grateful for that, though I don't show it often."

The man grunts once more in acknowledgement, being able to tell that these pictures held sentimental value. Silence once again filled the room, Jim once again returning to his seat, looking at his own phone. The time was now 12:30PM approximately. This is when he realized:

"Oh, shit, my Ute!" Jim states, quickly getting up from his chair. "That's why I came back here, the old bastard's gone and carked it a few miles from here, got to tow it back here myself!"

"So that's why I didn't hear you arrive back," the 'hound realizes. "Well, shit, sorry to hear."

Jim quickly gathers his keys and begins to head out of the living room, before he stops just before the hallway: "Oi, Loona, you want to come at all? Get out of the house a bit, got to do some shit anyway. Could teach you how to do pig shooting?"

The hound hesitates for a minute, looking up from her phone, considering her options: "Eh, fuck it, why not?"

"Alright," Jim acknowledges, "I'll be in that car near the shed over there." And with that, with his rifle and knife, he walks out the door, still pondering to himself as to whether this was real or not; The persistent pain in his back and shoulder told him that this was very much real.

Although the situation was very much in Jim's hands, fear and anxiety about this surreal development still clung onto his mind. Still, the woman had not tried anything funny when she clearly had the opportunity, so this began to put his mind at ease, or as much ease as possible. Finally, he made it to the shed a few paces away from his home, opening the door begrudgingly to find his lemon; another Ute, this time from the mid-2000s in age, weather-beaten and worn, its white paint faded and blotchy. He unlocks the door, gets in, and to his surprise, it starts, albeit with a struggle. He manages to drive it out slowly, heading out to the front of his house, to find the 'hound waiting for him on the porch. As he pulls it to a stop, she gets in on the passenger's side, seeming to be judging the exterior appearance.

"You know," Loona comments, "You could've at least cleaned it if you planned on using it."

"That's the thing; I never do," he chuckles; "I am not kidding when I say that this thing almost didn't make it out of the garage just now. It's only fifteen years old and it runs like I've dug it out of a ditch."

Loona couldn't help but chuckle to this remark herself: "That bad?"

Jim nods; "That bloody awful." With that, the car manages to drive down the gravel road, pulling out onto the main road, towards town.

Loona realises the direction they're heading, and becomes worried; "Hang on, we're not heading into town, are we?"

"Nah, not into, but towards; I'm not that crazy, with you looking like... well, that – no offense, though."

"Pffft- none taken," Loona responds.

"We're going to pull off to the left here at this dirt road coming up; going to teach you how to shoot," Jim states, indicating to the left before pulling into the beaten road; "This is also the road where the other Ute's gone and carked it, just up a little way from here now. We'll tow it a little later on, so we'll go and park alongside it."

"You're the boss," the 'hound responds in acknowledgement, looking at her surroundings.

After a few minutes of driving, the car pulls up to the familiar shape of the grey vintage Ute, pulled off to the side of the road. This is where Jim parks the white lemon adjacent

to it on the other side of the dirt path, turning it off, and getting out; "Well, here we are, then. Follow me, and I'll show you how to be a marksman."

"I'm not sure about being a marksman," Loona states, getting out of the car, "But I do know how to hunt, being a hellhound and all."

"No kidding," Jim responds, grabbing his rifle, "But here, we want clean shots. We don't want them torn apart and mangled; too messy and unprofessional, at least for me. I like to do it quickly and painlessly for them."

"Well, good for you," Loona replies, gesturing her hand in front of her; "Lead the way, then."

Jim nods and waves Loona onward, walking down into the bush. The grass was tall, though dry, and the trees hung over them, providing them cover from the beating sun. They walked a good couple of metres for what felt like two minutes until they reached a clearing in the trees, surrounded by dead fallen trees and an abundance of sticks and foliage. Jim props his rifle onto his shoulder and observes the area.

Loona observes as well, before asking impatiently: "So, what, we wait for these hogs to come to us, or...?"

"No, not necessarily," Jim replies, looking north, "Just got to find out the general area of where they are... and I think I just found one, over there," he points into the trees, a black mass trudging along in the distance.

"Quiet now," Jim whispers, gesturing for the hellhound to come over and observe. "Now, watch this..."

The man aims his rifle slowly up to his shoulder and leans up against one of the fallen trees. The hog, oblivious to the danger, briefly looks towards the marksman. Jim breaths in and out slowly, steadying his shot, before squeezing the trigger; "BANG!" The crack of gunfire briefly startles Loona, as well as being followed by a distant thud as the black mass slumps down.

"And that," Jim lectures, "Is how it's done; clean, swift, and little struggle."

"That's cool and all," Loona nods, "But it takes out the fun of it for me. As I said, I'm a 'hound, I like one-on-one hunting."

"As you keep saying," Jim replies, wiping his brow briefly. "Well, how about this; next one we see, you go show me how it's done, yeah? Hey, maybe you'll teach me

something."

Loona raises her brow, considering the proposal. She nods; "Sure, sounds like a deal. This will get gruesome, though."

"I can't wait," Jim remarks, laughing briefly.

The pair wait there for a good few minutes, the air around them quiet and still. Birds hung around in the distance, singing their bush song. This was up until another black mass, larger than the last, rocked up to the scene to the east. A massive boar, probably a quarter of Jim's height, approached the clearing slowly, observing the two hunters.

Loona eyes the fat mass with intent, grinning; "Watch this," she grins, preparing to strike.

A few seconds go by, until the hound suddenly lurches forward with unbelievable haste, startling the boar enough to make it stumble! It had little time to react until the 'hound bit down hard onto its neck, making it squeal in pain! Jim watches in awe as the mass is then pinned down, its neck bleeding profusely from where it could, before being thrown around, hitting trees until it became limp after much struggle.

"Fucking hell! Shit," Jim bellows in awe, "That's awful!"

"What," Loona turns around, wiping her mouth, "It's dead, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, I'll give you that," Jim replies, looking at the bleeding mass, "But bloody hell, why go out of the way to do it like that!?"

"Because it's fun," Loona shrugs.

"Fair enough," Jim shrugs in return, approaching the hellhound. "Need a rag for the blood?"

"Thanks," Loona replies, taking the loose rag offered to her, wiping the blood from her mouth.

The pair sat down shortly afterwards on the dead mass of trees where they could, observing the environment, enjoying the quiet. On occasion, there'd be another boar in the distance to which either Jim would shoot with profession or Loona would go after with brutality, to the entertainment of the hellhound and to the awe of the man, making him laugh in utter disbelief.

After an hour, there were a total of seven dead hogs, some mangled, some clean. It was early afternoon at this point, and both man and hellhound were spent from the day's work. They took the time to sit around and relax once more, a peaceful wind passing through frequently, cooling them both down.

"So, are you enjoying this?" Jim asked, taking a sip from his canister.

"Honestly? This is fun. Most I've had in a while, to be completely honest with you," Loona comments, dusting off her clothes from the settled dust.

"Hey, I'm glad," Jim laughs, cleaning his rifle; "Keeps you off that ruddy phone, doesn't it?"

The hellhound grunts, rolling her eyes; "Yeah, yeah, shut up. So, anyway, why do you kill these hogs," Loona inquired, observing the pile of bodies.

"Ah, well, they're a pest," Jim explains: "They kill wildlife, they terrorise local farmers, and it's also my job to kill them. About 500 dollars a head is the price they pay me, so it pays well."

"Shit," Loona thinks aloud, "Maybe I should take it up."

Jim chuckles, "Maybe you should! You could be my business partner, perhaps?"

Loona huffs, "Hehe, maybe."

They both sit in silence, looking around, a crow settling down next to the pile of hogs, picking at the bare meat. Jim shoos it away, telling it to 'fuck off' before it takes flight.

"Hang on, Jim?" Loona asks.

"Hm?" Jim looks up.

"I'm sorry for asking, but, how old are you," the 'hound inquires, "No reason for asking, just wondering."

Jim takes a swig of his canister once more, wiping his mouth afterwards; "I'm twenty-two years old, why?"

Loona looks at him, her brow raised in slight astonishment; "Really? You're that young??"

Jim smirks; "Yep! Why, is it because I look like I wash my face with sand?"

Loona hesitates, grunting in astonishment; "W-well, now that you put it that way, yeah!"

"What about you, then," Jim inquires in return, "How old are you?"

"Oh, I'm the same age," Loona replies, "twenty-two."

"Ah, I figured," Jim acknowledges, nodding to himself, taking off his broad-brim hat and dusting it off. He rests it in his lap afterwards before propping up his rifle in his lap.

Loona, meanwhile, continues to look at her phone, scrolling through whatever she was viewing. That familiar look of slight pensiveness on her face once again returning. She sighs briefly, before putting it down. Jim looks up, somehow knowing what was on her mind:

"You miss them, don't you?"

Loona nods, running her hand through her hair. "Mhm... I can't even get onto them through my phone."

Jim nods sympathetically, moving slightly towards her, using his Lee Enfield as a crutch. He extends his hand towards the 'hound. Loona hesitates, shifting away from it. She thought about it for a few seconds, before holding onto his hand very begrudgingly.

"Don't worry, yeah? I'm sure they're finding a way," Jim tries to reassure.

She nods, "I hope so. Also, just so you know, I don't do this whole physical contact thing often. Just for future reference."

The man acknowledges this, letting go of her hand; "Oh, no worries. Apologies."

Loona waves her hand; "You're fine... thank you, though."

"No worries, don't mention it. Happy to help where I can," Jim reassures.

The hellhound nods, lying back a bit against her dead tree. Jim does the same, looking off into the distance at nothing in particular. At last, peace had filled the air, and both man and hellhound felt content with their surroundings. A good fifteen minutes had passed before Jim made his first move, using his rifle to help him stand back up. Loona followed suit, getting up with a stretch, before they began carrying the boars to throw them at the back of the Ute they had traveled in.

After the load was secure, Jim hooked his disgraced gray Ute to the back of the 'white lemon', as Loona got in the passenger's seat, waiting to go. After being sure that both

loads were secure, he got into the driver's seat, started the engine, and set off once more for home. At long last, with some small talk along the way, they returned to the house. Loona went inside as Jim reassured her that he didn't need help to store everything away.

The hellhound made herself at home once more in the living room, sitting in the chair she had sat in as part of their 'peace negotiations' hours before. She sunk into it, closing her eyes briefly. She felt once more at peace. Of course, there was the matter of going back to her true home, but for now, at least, Jim's home was hers as well; To have a temporary firm location was what mattered, and for Jim's generosity, despite everything, she was very much thankful, perhaps even in his debt she could never repay.

After a couple of minutes alone, she heard Jim walk in and slump in the chair next to her. He sighed, taking his boots off; "Well, look at us; back to square one," he joked, referring to the chairs.

Loona grunted, half-laughing: "Indeed we are," she responded, running her fingers through her gray hair once more.

The two sit in silence for a while, the serenity of this old timber house drowning out any outside disruptions. Jim checked his phone once more as Loona stared outside at nothing in particular. The silence was broken, however, when a noise was heard:

"PING!"

Jim looked up, and so did Loona, trying to find the source.

"Was that you," Loona asked Jim, turning towards him.

"No, not my phone," Jim confirmed, double checking his notifications. Suddenly the realization hit; "Hang on... was that..."

Loona's scarlet-red eyes widened, suddenly sitting upright in the chair, grabbing her phone quickly with such force that she almost threw it across the room. She stared at her screen intently, desperately trying to confirm whether it was her.

Loona's mouth sat slightly agape; her eyes wide: "It's my phone... it-IT'S MY PHONE!"

"You're joking," Jim exclaimed; "Who's it from? Is it a message?"

Loona desperately unlocked her phone, her hands shaking. She read the message with intent. A slight smile from her agape mouth appeared:

"T-they're coming for me! THEY'RE COMING FOR ME, JIM! They know where I am! They can't come right away, they're still trying to figure that out- but- but they'll be here SOON," she exclaimed, her voice echoing throughout the house. Loona fell back in her chair, her arms to the side, a huge sigh of relief escaping her lips: "Oh thank fuck! I'm going home!"

Jim smiles widely, happy for his tenant: "Oh shit, congrats!"

Loona gathers her composure, looking at Jim now: "If you tell them I was this happy for them to come get me, I will obliterate you," she demanded, half-joking.

Jim holds up his hand, placing one hand on his chest: "You know you have my word that I won't, I promise."

"And-... and thank you, for everything," Loona replies, placing her palm on her forehead, thankful that the ordeal may soon be over.

Jim raises his hand as a gesture to say "no worries" before speaking again: "Hey, I'm glad you're returning home, after the shit you've been through here; It's crap being homesick."

Jim hesitates a minute before continuing: "You know, Loona... despite our differences and, well, your abruptness at times... I personally think that, and forgive me for saying this, that we may have a bit of a friendship between us."

Loona froze at this, removing her palm from her forehead and looking up slightly. She hesitates for a minute, seemingly thinking on the notion, before finally speaking:

"You know what? I think so, too," she responds, turning her head towards him with a smile on her face, not a grin or a smirk, but a genuine smile.

Jim smiles in return, taking a swig from his water canister once more. He looks towards the sunset in the window, past Loona, peering out to the west. The last light before sunset gave off a mesmerizing pink and orange hue over the horizon, the scattered clouds reflecting the light. Suddenly, Jim's brow furrowed, getting up from his chair and walking to the window, albeit with caution.

Loona notices this and looks towards his general direction; "What?"

Jim, with his back towards the hellhound, replies quietly; "Come look at this."

Loona hesitates, before getting up and moving next to him for a spot. Jim points to the tree line in the distance; "You see this?"

In the distance, between the trees, was a mass. The mass was obscured by shadow, but whatever it was, was tall and resembled something humanoid. It stood there, seemingly looking outwards into the trees, though where it was looking was up to debate.

"This isn't one of your mates, is it," Jim inquired to the 'hound, who was looking as intently as him at this figure.

"No..." Loona replied, "...No, this is something else... What is it?"

"I don't know," Jim explained, "But I've been seeing it since I moved in a couple of years ago."

Loona squinted, getting uneasy at the mass' presence; "So, do you know anything about it?"

Jim shakes his head; "I've heard stories, though, of distant shit in that bush. Partially the reason why I have that rifle in the first place. Don't get me wrong, you're scary enough as it is, but this... this is something else."

The sun was really setting now, and the mass was getting harder and harder to see. Loona tries to convince Jim to go after it, having her as backup, before Jim shoots her a concerned yet firm look, giving her a simple "I wouldn't do that." In that split second that they both looked at each other and turned again to look at the figure, it had vanished. They try finding it again, but to no avail, leaving them both dumbfounded and unnerved.

An uneasy silence filled the room before Loona tried to change the subject onto the subject of dinner, to which Jim obliged, nodding slightly; "I'll fix you something. I'll be in the kitchen, but if anything comes up from that tree line again, let me know," he asks, glancing through the window once more before heading to the fridge.

"Got it," Loona agrees, looking out once more before carefully looking back to her phone, giving slightly uneasy glances back outside every now and again.

After a good half hour, dinner was served, a steak sandwich. It was plain, but it would suffice. Loona chowed down on hers to the slight bewilderment of Jim, whilst he ate his at a slower pace.

"Do you know how to chew food, mate," Jim inquired, watching her almost scoff down the contents of her plate.

Loona looks up, one side of her brow raised: "What? I'm hungry."

Jim shakes his head, chuckling: "Fair enough."

Dinner was soon enough eaten, with Jim chucking the plates away into the sink, planning in his head to get around to cleaning them – whenever that would be. The sun had gone down at that point, and the rest of the evening until bed was made up of small talk, lengthy conversations about nothing in particular, shots of brandy, and stories shared by both man and 'hound. After a while of lively conversing and checking briefly outside for the possible presence of the earlier black mass, the two of them said their goodnights, before setting off to bed, though Jim, still somewhat weary of the earlier sighting, waited on the veranda for roughly an hour with his rifle for any possible intruders.

Day 5

The next morning came, with Loona the first to wake up. Groggily, she checks her phone for the time: "5:36AM" it read. She groans, still trying to wake up, staring at the ceiling. Loona looks outside, the morning air forming a ground-level patchy fog over the terrain, obscuring parts of the horizon. It looked gorgeous, she thought to herself, almost peaceful. At last, she gets up, throwing the sheets off of her. Was she going to make the bed in question? Probably not.

Rubbing her back, Loona leaves her bedroom, across the hallway and out the front door onto the veranda. The air was slightly cooler that morning, almost crisp. Through the window behind her was Jim's bedroom, curtains drawn. Through the crack, however, Loona could tell that he was still waking up, sitting upright with his back to the window, about to get up. She turns back around, looking outwards into the ranges towards the summit.

Thoughts ran through Loona's head to keep her from boredom; not bad thoughts, more like thoughts about this strange place, this part of the world that before she would not have even dreamt of going; though after five or so days of being essentially trapped here, she thought of how it seemed to grow on her. Loona enjoyed it, the serenity and quiet of the plains and scattered trees: She smiles briefly, thinking on this - Through her fucked-up moments in her life, this was a place that would be perfect to reflect in.

After a while, Jim groggily walks out the door as well, sitting on a chair on the opposite side of Loona's sitting position. He had come out with a coffee, gently sipping on the hot contents before sitting down. He nods to the hellhound; "Morning to you."

The adjacent hellhound looked to her left, nodding to the caretaker of the property: "Morning."

Quiet once again settled. Loona begins to check her phone once more, remarkably able to connect to the internet again. Brief snickers left her mouth, finding humour in the

contents of her screen, before settling back down with her signature blank expression.

"Hey," Jim finally says, looking towards the hound, "I got to take those hogs down to Roy's joint. Do you want to head into town at all, get something if you need?"

"Eh, might as well," Loona confirms, "I'll just change myself to my guise, and I'll be out shortly."

Jim nods, throwing his hand up in acknowledgement. Loona heads back inside to prepare herself for the day. Jim was already prepared, kitted out with his usual attire, shirt, trousers, boots; he was an early riser, after-all.

After a while, Loona arrives back out onto the porch, this time in her human guise, running her fingers through her hair to take out the knots as best as she could; "Ready when you are."

"No worries," Jim replies, getting up from his chair. He grabs his rifle and leads Loona back down to his run-down piece-of-shit lemon from the day before. They both get back in, and with a brief splutter and a bit of cursing (to Loona's amusement), the car starts once more, making its way back down the beaten path, onto the main road and right into town.

Small talk once again broke out between the two, in some cases continuing conversations that had taken place the night before where context and subject didn't necessarily matter. These moments of conversation further proved to the both of them that, indeed, there was an active, though unexpected friendship developing between them. After unloading the group of dead boars from the back of the Ute, with Roy making his awe known about the seemingly mauled ones, the two parties went their separate ways briefly: Loona heading to the service station, and Jim heading to the gun store for extra ammunition. After a while, they both met back up at the Ute, and made the return home.

"So then," Jim started, rubbing his hands from the cold whilst holding the wheel, "Got anything planned, or just the usual?"

"Oh, just the usual," Loona replied, without taking her eyes off the screen, "Just hanging around, being a tumour on your property."

"Oh, shut up," Jim replied, laughing, "Don't be like that. You're fine, besides, a mate's got to help out a friend."

"Whatever you say, boss-man," Loona scoffs, still looking at her screen with a keen fixation.

Suddenly, the Ute begins to splutter once more, the shit-box finally seeming to have carked it at long last, or at least for the umpteenth time. Jim begins swearing, cursing the bloody thing, before finally pulling on the side of the road.

"Déjà vu, huh," Loona teases, smirking at the frustrated man next to her.

"Don't laugh too soon, matey," Jim half-jokes in return, "We're both going to have to walk back home if this fucking thing doesn't work."

He unlocks the bonnet of the Ute, wanting to confirm his suspicions of the cause of his least favourite's issue. Jim first checks the dipstick, making an unusual discovery; no Oil, which to be honest was his fault for not checking beforehand, though to save him the humiliation, he wouldn't mention this mistake to the occupant of the passenger's seat to save him from mockery.

Suddenly from the distance, a loud crack was heard, startling Jim so much that he hit his head on the underside of the bonnet, making him briefly wince in pain. He rubs his head, looking into the direction of where he thinks the source of the noise came from. He could see as well that the sudden noise also alerted Loona from her phone, who was now looking intently into the same direction he was.

Another thunderous distant clap was heard, followed this time by a sudden "WHOOSH!" past his ear; a stray bullet! Jim quickly lurches back, cowering behind the other side of the stranded Ute!

"SHIT! Loona, get the fuck out of there," Jim bellows, trying to peek over the other side to get a clear view of their attacker!

Loona scurries out of the car, cowering behind the car alongside the driver; "What the fuck was that!?"

"Someone's out for us, that's what that is!"

Jim grabs his rifle from behind the driver's seat after making a mad dash to retrieve it, once again under sudden pot-shots, one almost hitting his leg, only to then have it penetrate the side of the car, hitting the engine! With every opportunity he could, he returned fire to the general direction, though the long grass and foliage in the distance didn't help him find exact locations.

Loona tries to peek over the now bullet-ridden car to get a closer look at whoever was firing at them! Through immense stress from the situation, she manages to peek over into the distance to briefly see a familiar shape in the distance, trying her hardest not to get hit. Her eyes widen, her mouth slightly agape, before finally yelling at the marksman next to her.

"Wait a minute, stop shooting," she cries, placing her hand on Jim's shoulder to his sudden surprise; "I think I know who it is!" Loona begins waving to the general direction: "STOP, FOR FUCK SAKES! YOU'RE ABOUT TO HIT ME YOU DUMBASS!"

"What are you doing," Jim asks desperately, dumbfounded.

"It's them," Loona replies, still waving her arms, "It's those guys from the photo I showed you yesterday!"

"That's them!?"

Jim very briefly lowers his rifle, ceasing his return fire, though still keeping his head down, fearful of their true intent. If this was truly them, what intention would they have with him? He didn't have to wait long as the tall grass began to shift, a shape quickly moving towards them, calling out Loona's name loudly with desperation and... relief?

Trying to look over the bonnet, Jim spots a shape rush out of the grass, and across the road. He lifts his head further up, only to be met with a sudden pressure on the back of his head, cold steel.

"Hands up, fuck-stick!"

He shoots his hands up, surrendering; "Shit-shit, don't shoot!"

He then feels himself being thrown to the ground, an object pressing into his back, forcing him head-first into the dirt! He grunts in pain and distress, trying to see whatever the hell was forcing him down. He manages to catch a glimpse of his captive, an odd creature, arguably odder in appearance than his passenger, with a scarlet pigmented skin, dressed in a suit of sorts.

"Hey, hey, what the fuck, he hasn't done anything!" Loona bellows to Jim's attacker, approaching the scene by the sounds of things.

"What did he do- WHAT did YOU do to my Loons!?" The unknown attacker demands, further pressing the muzzle in the back of Jim's head.

"FUCK- I didn't do anything! She'd have my head already if I did-," Jim tried to explain, before being kicked in the side with force, causing Jim to bellow out in pain!

"OH, I swear, fucko, I'm this close to blowing your fucking brains ou-"

Suddenly, the pressure from the back of his head was swiped away, as a hand firmly grabbed the barrel, pulling it away from the incapacitated Jim.

Loona came right up to the face of this sudden intruder, baring her teeth and wearing an incredibly angry look: "BLITZ, I said stop! Are you fucking dense!?"

Jim's brow furrowed; "Blitz? W-who the fu- Oh shoot, you must be Loona here's associate! Mate, please, I absolutely swear, nothing happened here! I-I absolutely promise you! I've been looking after her whilst you couldn't get here!"

The newcomer darted his piercing gaze up towards Loona, with her nodding, confirming Jim's testimony. The figure nodded slowly, bringing Jim back up onto his feet with a heave, Jim's clothes now covered in dirt and a hint of mud, a few ants crawled over his forehead. The newcomer dusted Jim's ragged clothes, and patted him on the shoulder: "Okay, bucko, I apologise... at least for the moment."

Jim examined the freakish looking specimen in front of him now, lurching back in hesitation: "Bloody hell, you're more disturbing than you are in the photos," he remarked, though now was most likely not the time for those.

"Call me whatever you like, but don't get too witty just yet," the specimen replied, poking Jim in the chest; "Sorry about your car, by the way."

Jim scoffed; "Nah, don't worry about it. It's a piece of shit, anyhow."

"Name's Blitz, by the way," the newcomer announced, stretching his arm out for a handshake, which Jim flatly rejected:

"Not the type to shake hands with folks that shoot at me, matey."

The newcomer retracts his hand, rolling his eyes; "Well damn, I'm sorry for wanting my fucking DAUGHTER back!"

Jim looked up from dusting his clothes off, hesitating, and swiftly looking back up with an incredibly baffled look on his face: "Your what? Okay, this is getting strange really quick!"

"Look, it's a long story," Loona piped in, "Probably too long, but yes – he's... sort of my parental figure, I suppose."

Jim darts his gaze back at Loona with a squint, still trying to get used to this very new information which had only developed within the past couple of minutes. He shrugs, dusting the dirt from his hat before finally putting it back on: "Alright, I guess it is what it is. So, like, what's happening here; you are taking her back home, or...?"

Blitz thinks for a few seconds, observing his surroundings; "You know what? No, not yet. I quite like this place; I guess I'll stay for a while longer. Hey! Why don't you lead us back home, then?"

"It's a bit of a walk," Jim explains, "If you don't mind walking."

The creature shrugs, swinging his firearm over his shoulder before gesturing his hand in front of him; "Lead the way, you big damn hillbilly!"

Jim shoots the creature a deadeye look at the name-caller before grabbing his rifle and keys before leading the other two parties, confining the finally dead lemon to the side of the road. He leads them off the path of the road, up an old trail obscured by dense trees and bush, making small talk with this newcomer in order to make sense of this situation he was in. As they were all walking through the trail, Loona returned to her true hellhound form. As well as this, Jim was being bombarded by interesting, albeit stupid, questions from the new arrival about his life, his rifle, and his attire which especially annoyed him.

At long last, the party arrived back onto his property, up the slight hill and onto the porch, with Blitz remarking of "how neat" the place was and was thinking of "moving in"; this prompted Jim to shoot him a look of "don't even think about it" before setting some general ground rules about visitors to his house, which the newcomer begrudgingly agreeing, albeit with coaxing from Loona to cooperate. Jim led them both into the living room, providing all, including himself, with something to sit on. He takes off his hat, still rubbing his head from the impact of himself colliding from the car bonnet.

"You got a great set-up here! So, you've been holding my Loons captive here, have you?" Blitz interrogates, staring the homeowner down with intent to harm if necessary.

"Fucken- No, she hasn't been held captive here," Jim emphasizes the point "She's gotten her own room and bloody everything, helped me with pig shooting the other day."

"Hunting, hey? Well, shoot, didn't know you were a gun-inclined," Blitz concedes to Loona.

"Oh, she didn't shoot them; more brutalized them – mauled them to death, you should've seen it," Jim corrects him, chuckling.

The newcomer laughs, grinning; "Oh trust me, big man, I think I can imagine. By the way, Loons! Didya find Malloy?"

"Oh, we found him, Jim drove me up there," Loona concedes; "He was dead before I got to him, it looked like a couple of days before I arrived."

"Ah, shit! They gotta die at the right time, don't they," the newcomer exclaims, sighing in disappointment.

"What can you do, matey? Anyways, have this and calm down," Jim butts in, offering the visitor a shot of brandy, to which he accepts quickly, downing it down in a few seconds.

"How did you end up mooching off this guy for his home, not that I have a problem with it," Blitz eagerly asks Loona, leaning forward in his seat, his chin resting in his palm.

Loona looks away briefly, finding something to say; "Okay, don't freak out, but... well, you see..."

"Found her in the creek down here, suffering from heat exhaustion, to put it mildly," Jim intervenes, answering the question for the hellhound.

"What!? No, no, oh fuck- oh fuck- Loons I'm so sorry! W-what happened- a-are you okay? I-I'm so sorry! The fucking portal wouldn't open, a-and I-," the visitor desperately stammers and haphazardly tries to explain, staggering over to his 'daughter'. He collapses before her seat, landing on his knees and becoming lost for words, anguish and guilt painted on his face.

Loona shoots Jim a piercing look, with Jim raising his eyebrows and shrugging; "What? Had to tell him the truth."

"THIS is why I was hesitating, you idiot," Loona concedes, before turning her attention to her 'associate'; "Blitz, look at me, I'm fine! He saved my life! I swear, I'm fine," she exclaims, trying desperately to get the nervous wreck out of his episode.

It took longer than reasonably expected, but after a "brief" episode of just about going insane with the thought of possibly losing, essentially, a part of his 'family', Blitz calms

down at last, picking himself up. He then turns around and desperately thanks the larger fellow behind him, with Jim in question repeatedly reassuring this visitor that 'it's all good' and 'no worries' before handing the visitor another shot of brandy to loosen up. The new shot glass and its contents in question disappeared from his hands and out of the small shot glass in a matter of not even half a second.

"Just a minute; Loona, aren't there another two of you," Jim inquired, not particularly wanting to meet them – besides; two of them was enough for him.

"There is," Blitz butts in, finally calm enough to function from his brief panic attack, "They're dealing with some other bullshit I don't think you want to hear."

Jim nods in acknowledgement, examining Blitz' most bizarre rifle. He judges it with intent, squinting at the smaller, more bizarre details such as the seemingly strange optics and the odd paint scheme. He leans in a bit closer towards it, Blitz noticing this curiosity. He picks up his firearm to the brief surprise of Jim before Blitz shows it off to the homeowner, boasting about it:

"I know, big guy, it's impressive and all that – a killer, isn't it?"

Jim raises his brow, scoffing; "It looks like a toy, matey," he remarked, to the amusement of Loona who snickered with a wide smirk in the background.

This left Blitz taken aback, sneering at the grinning man; "A toy, is it!? This "toy" has slaughtered hundreds if not thousands! It would ABSOLUTELY, GUARAN-FUCKING-TEED turn your head into jello!"

Jim chuckled loudly; "Yeah, nah, I don't doubt that if you didn't miss all your shots."

"WARNING Shots, you retard," Blitz was quick to correct, folding his arms and slumping back into the chair.

Loona intervenes, still finding this amusing; "Easy now, Blitz, calm yourself. Well, shit, why don't you prove it to Jim that it's that good?"

"You can't be serious, Loonie; prove it to this clown," Blitz gestured to Jim, who was polishing his respective rifle. Suddenly, Blitz thought about it, then changed his mind most likely due to his bruised ego; "You know what? Sure, okay, as long as the missing link here also agrees."

Jim shrugs, unperturbed; "Sure thing, boss-man. Go on, we'll go Pig Shooting tomorrow, yeah? Out into the tree line over there. If you can take down one of the largest ones out

there, then I'll concede that you're as great a marksman as you are short."

"What, a few fucking hogs? Big challenge, big man," Blitz scoffed, with Loona rolling her eyes in the background, sneaking a picture of her disgruntled parental figure.

"Oh, you'll see," Jim responded with a blank stare; "Anyhow, the both of you have got all day to reunite and catch up, so I'll leave you to that. First thing tomorrow morning, we head out."

Jim then gets up, bringing his Lee Enfield; "I'll be in the garage if any of you need anything," Jim announces to the hellhound before making his way to tend to his much more beloved Ute, now his only car which was still temporarily out of order.

"Blitz, do you have to be so obnoxious," Loona criticises, turning her attention from her phone.

"I'm supposed to take shit from him, am I, Loons," Blitz pitifully deflects.

"All he did was call that thing a 'toy'," Loona replies, raising her brow, gesturing to the firearm now in Blitz's arms.

"You KNOW how much I love this thing," he deflects, still holding onto it in his lap.

As the hellhound and odd creature reunite and catch up from within his home, Jim gets to work on his Ute, a tin-cup of water in his hand. After opening the bonnet followed by a little bit of examination, it was almost immediately clear that a general engine failure had occurred, mostly due to shot spark plugs. He grunts, rummaging around the shelves to find a set, to which eventually he does. Half an hour passes and brief moments of tending to his precious Ute, entranced and fixated deeply in his task, a sudden wrapping on the steel door alerts him. He puts down his gear and approaches the door; It was Loona.

"Yeah, mate, what's up," Jim asks, opening the door fully.

"Hey, look, Blitz wanted to ask you if we could go up to Malloy's home," Loona explains, getting straight to the point.

Jim raises his eyebrow; "Ah, yeah? Why's that?"

Loona shrugs: "He just said he wanted to scope it out, see if there was anything he could take."

Jim scratches his cheek, thinking about it: "Ah, you know what? Sure. Not like I got anything else to do. The Ute's up and running again, but problem is that, as you know, it's only a two-seater. He'll have to hold on in the back."

"Alright, cool," Loona replies, heading back up into the house to relay the message.

Jim turns back to his Ute and gets in, turning the ignition to be met with the car finally starting after its breakdown. He sighs in relief and shakes his head; "The things I do for people, I'm too bloody nice," he thinks to himself, before slowly driving out of the garage.

The pristine-looking Ute pulls up on the gravel track once again, parking in front of the veranda. He gets out to retrieve some gear, as well as to check on the current situation which he was still very much getting used to; he still hadn't gotten over the fact that he had been accommodating such a strange being as Loona, let alone having another one accompanying her now.

He gets inside, finding the hellhound giving Blitz a run-through of the things that have happened to her since both Jim and her met. Blitz himself had a multitude of questions, such as "has he hurt you in any way" and "was she severely ill in any way" which Loona was getting increasingly frustrated with answering, possibly due to how repetitive and frequent they sounded. Despite this, she knew that it was only coming from the goodness of Blitz's heart. Jim interrupts the middle of the conversation, announcing that he was ready to go, to which the both of them obliged, most likely to the relief of the 'hound.

Blitz was the first one to begin leaving, but not before sharply stopping in front of Jim, darting his gaze directly at him, stabbing his finger into Jim's chest; "I'm watching you, big man; no funny business with my daughter, ok?"

Jim raises his hands with a blank expression; "No worries," he conceded, sighing.

Loona follows suit, with Jim being the last to leave, as the three of them get into their respective places, Loona in the passenger's side, and Blitz, begrudgingly, in the back tray. Jim heaves his way into the driver's side and shutting the door. Once again, he starts the engine, and the pseudo-entourage sets off.

"I see what you mean by 'overprotective'," Jim remarks, gesturing to the passenger outside in the tray.

Loona sighs, looking outside; "He doesn't mean it, I know that, but fuck! Well, look, he's kinda better than what he used to be. This situation's fucked up his nerves, so I understand."

Jim nods, understanding completely as well.

The drive doesn't take too long, just a good half-a-dozen or so minutes of driving, weaving off into the beaten gravel and dirt track, up towards Malloy's old home. They pass the tree they found his body in, the body in question long since gone. At long last, they pull up into the front of the property, parking up near the entrance, which leads down a slight embankment to a quaint, now derelict, house.

Jim gets up and out, so does Loona, as Blitz eagerly leaps out of the tray and rubs his hands, making his way down the beaten pathway.

"You know, this is the first time I've ever been up so close to his property," Jim explained to both members of the trio.

"First time for everything! Hey, Loonie! I'll take the front, and you check the surrounding area for anything interesting," Blitz dictates, making a slight jog down the embankment, Loona following slower but closely behind.

Jim, meanwhile, checks his ammunition, and brings his Enfield just in case. Whilst the duo check the surrounding property, with Blitz making the most noise with his pillaging and searching, Jim leans by a nearby tree, checking his watch for the time. He sighs, looking up into the sky above before getting a closer, more intriguing look into this once very mysterious property. To the left of him obscured by an especially thick collection of foliage was a timber shed, perhaps even a stable, obviously run down and about to fall apart. He peers through an especially rotted part of the entrance doors, looking inside with curiosity. Nothing too much of note could be seen at first glance, but on the wall around the back, obscured by debris was a gun mounted to a wall, what Jim swore could've been an old-fashioned Lever-Action Rifle.

This discovery prompted him to try and break in, attempting to kick the door in; it didn't budge. Instead, he opted for tugging it open; he firmly held the handles of the door, pulling it hard a few times before the lock, which was barely hanging by a thread, disintegrated, the doors swinging open. Jim cautiously attempts to walk in, observing the surroundings, just old tools, and other indistinguishable objects. He was just about to walk right in when he felt his foot trip over a taut rope, which released suddenly. He stumbled forward a bit, briefly losing his balance, as he felt something swing right by him, over his head, barely missing him!

Jim gasps, gaining his footing once more and finding a gruesome discovery, in awe and relief; What had swung by him was a long plank of timber with a large, rusty machete blade embedded right into it.

He gasps, calling out to both of his accompanying entourage; "Oi, Loona, Blitz! Come look at this out here!"

Loona was the first to arrive at the scene, growing wide-eyed at the makeshift death-trap; "Woah, what the fuck?"

Blitz followed suit, somewhat oblivious to the swinging machete blade at first, before finally noticing it, a large, smug smile spreading on his face; "Ohohohoho! Hoo, boy! That's fucking good!"

Jim examines the contraption, gesturing at it to Loona; "You see what I meant by 'he's dangerous'? That could've been you at the end of this thing."

"Well, shoot, now I'm glad he died before I could try and kill him," Loona re-evaluated, briefly shuddering at the thought.

Blitz approaches it, examining the absolutely 'genius' details into it; a trip wire on the floor, leading up to the ceiling, with a release lever; "I think I'll take note of this in future! Like, shit, how haven't I thought of this before?"

Jim, meanwhile, approaches the dusty lever-action rifle, though remarkably in better condition than he thought. He dusted it off, only to reveal very minimal dust; "Oi, Blitz – I think this may interest you as well," he hints, handing the rifle with one hand to the imp-looking creature.

Blitz examines it, peering with one eye and holding it up to the sunlight; "You are a very good judge of character, big man. Not the smartest and probably borderline challenged, but still a good judge!"

Jim pretends to not hear it, moving on with the next question; "So then, what did the both of you find?"

Loona replies, shrugging; "Nothing much, just some suspicious-looking stuff, rotten food, and a literal huge mound of who-the-fuck-knows from I don't know who or what around the back. This place is a literal dump!"

"I say we torch the place to hell," Blitz chimes in, pulling out a lighter, to which both man and hellhound immediately reply with a resounding "No".

Jim looks towards the unkempt house, the doorway smashed in presumably by Blitz's reckless plundering. He notices something rectangular near the front entrance; "Hang on a minute, what's that?"

Loona looks over, following Jim's gaze; "What, that box?"

Jim approaches it, followed closely behind by the accompanying duo. He cautiously opens it, in awe of the contents. In it was a group of long and faded tubes, covered in dust. He reads the odd labels with what appeared to be caution signs, before he realises the contents; "Holy shit, these are explosives!"

Loona examines them closer, before backing away with sudden caution and worry that they might blow up with the slightest of movement, whilst Blitz was much less cautious, grinning widely.

"Oh, come on, please, we GOTTA use these," an excited and charismatic Blitz exclaims, looking in the house itself; "If we can't torch this popsicle stand, at least we could blow it up! You know, rig it up full of this good shit."

Loona rolls her eyes, knowing this was perhaps a very fucking stupid idea, whilst Jim, though at first hesitant, made his judgement clear:

"...you know what? Fuck it, let's do it!"

Loona glares at Jim, dumfounded; "What the fuck- don't encourage him!"

Jim turns towards Loona as he makes his way to the crate; "Encouraging him? No. I guess I'm treating myself; encouraging your old man here is a by-product."

Loona scowls: "Okay, first off, he's not my 'old man', and... you know what? Just do it, not like I can stop either of you pair of dickheads," she capitulates, leaning on a nearby tree, though growing somewhat curious of the final results of this "genius" idea.

Eagerly, Blitz grabs some sticks of explosives, running into the house to plant them wherever he felt was suitable. Jim went for a slightly different approach, choosing to stick them around the windows and door frame, as well as around the railings surrounding the balcony. Loona, meanwhile, took a picture of these two "braindead dipshits" with her phone, a slight smirk breaking out from her otherwise blank expression.

After a little while, Jim had fixed them all into place, making a light jog back to the de-facto rendezvous point, followed by Loona; a solid stack of hard timber which somehow hadn't rotted away. Blitz followed afterwards, at last retreating from their target, hopping over the timber stack and peering over.

"Ready when you are, big guy," Blitz announced, preparing himself.

"What," Jim replied, confused; "Who's igniting the fuse?"

"Thought you were, seeming this is your idea," Blitz remarked, deflecting the responsibility, looking at him momentarily before refixing with his gaze to the house.

"What? Fuck off, this was your idea. Hey look, seeming that this is YOUR idea, you go light the fuse, or..." Jim sighs heavily, hesitating; "Or you could use my rifle to shoot at one of them, considering that you're such a bloody good shot."

"Oh, so NOW you admit it," Blitz scoffed; "You're not as dumb as you lo-"

"Can one of you just fucking do it already," Loona chimed in, becoming impatient.

Blitz chuckles, grabbing the rifle from Jim's very reluctant hands; "Ohohohoho, you got it! Watch this, fucko."

Blitz steadies the rifle, getting used to the feel of the wooden stock. He breathes in and out slowly, before he finally pulls the trigger.

"BANG!"

Followed immediately by the gunfire was a sudden vibration from the accompanying explosions, as the rotted and abandoned home spontaneously combusted, sending glass and timber flying in numerous directions! The sound was deafening as the trio desperately ducked for cover, most of the debris flying directly over them, damaging surrounding trees! After a couple of seconds, all that was left was a massive pile of smoking debris, a huge pile of rubble.

Jim chuckled loudly, followed by Blitz, whilst Loona merely watched in overwhelming awe at the dramatic aftermath.

"WHAT, THE, FUCK," Loona finally exclaims, "That was insane!"

"It was fun was what that was, Loonie," Blitz chortles, whilst Jim finally composed himself and stood back up.

"Okay, sure, I'll give you that! But now we've alerted EVERYONE from a thousand-mile radius," Loona exclaims once more, taking a photo of the aftermath.

Jim waved his hand, still laughing; "Nah, nah, don't worry about it! Nobody ever comes up this way anymore! Besides, fucking- who's going to care that the piece-of-shit's house is now gone!? We've cleansed this bushland!"

"Okay, that's a good point," Loona concedes, chuckling at the question.

"So! That's us then," Jim concedes, making his way back up the hill, "I guess we'll head back, yeah?"

Loona shrugs: "Well, I guess so. Are you coming, Blitz, or are you going to- WOAH WHAT THE FUCK?"

Blitz was busy stuffing a few sticks of the same explosive in his pockets; "What? I think I'll make good use of these in future!"

Jim, noticing this, gets a shock: "OI! NO, you are NOT bringing live fucking dynamite onto my Ute!"

Blitz capitulates quickly, tipping the explosives out with a disappointed grunt, following both Jim and Loona back up the hill to the dirt road. They discovered, fortunately, that the Ute had not sustained any damage, but there were very small chunks of debris that landed from the explosion scattered around. One by one, they all boarded up once more and made the trip home, Jim once again being the driver, Blitz inspecting with deep fixation the rifle he had plundered from the home, and Loona, surprisingly, taking a brief photo of herself.

Arriving back home, the party heads back inside, Jim once again retiring to the living room briefly before retreating to the kitchen to fix something up. A brief lunch was served, that being leftover steaks from the evening before. Jim, exhausted by the day, practically collapsed into his lounge chair. He dusts off his clothes briefly, before noticing, from across the room, a very hushed and private discussion between the reunited "family." He tries to listen in, growing suspicious. Loona's facial expression held a baffled look on her face, mouthing off the sentence "what did you do this time", her brow furrowed, whilst Blitz seemed to emphasise something important to her.

Jim thought that he heard something about "staying here" from Blitz before he decided to interrupt, perhaps rudely: "I'm sorry, what?"

Blitz turns around, scratching the back of his head, wanting to say something; "Oh, ok, uh... yeah- look, I need to... well, I need to ask you a favour, big man."

Jim leans in, listening; "Go on," he insists, bracing for something outlandish.

Blitz stutters a little more, not sure if he should say it, until Loona cuts in: "Blitz has gone and pissed someone off back home and now they want his head. He wants to stay

here for a couple days," she sighs harshly, obviously annoyed at this very new development.

Jim stutters, dumfounded, scowling at a nervous Blitz; "I'm sorry, I beg your pardon? So, you come here, render my Ute defunct, point a gun at my head whilst I'm down while threatening to blow my brains out, mock me, and NOW you want to stay here, free of charge?"

Blitz stares off to the side, rubbing the back of his head: "Yesss...? Look, Jim-boy, please, I-I need to ride this out a couple of days at most- look, only tomorrow and the next day!"

Jim glares at the stuttering imp, shaking his head, before pointing his hand at Blitz's direction; "First off, matey, don't call me 'Jim-boy', and second of all, if you want to stay here, you're going to have to work for it, yeah?"

Blitz desperately shakes his head; "Y-yes of course! Anything you need!"

Jim hesitates, thinking about what he could get him to do, before shaking his head; "Look, we'll sort it out tomorrow – cross that bridge when we get there."

The afternoon passed quickly, Blitz trying to explain the situation to Jim who could barely catch on to anything he was saying, whilst Loona interjected here and there to spell it out for Jim, who although still didn't understand the situation, nor did he really want to, he still got the gist of it in the end; something about 'killing the wrong guy' earlier in the year and something else about money owed to somebody, finally coming back to bite Blitz in the arse or something like that.

The rest of the afternoon was made up of that brief spontaneous banter, brief arguments between Blitz and Jim over perhaps the pettiest of subjects, and lectures by Blitz and Loona about what their line of work was, and who exactly these people that wanted Blitz dead were. At some point, Jim admitted that all of this was probably much more information than what he ever needed.

The evening, too, was spent virtually the same way – nothing of note happening, except Blitz perhaps going way too overboard with the alcohol that had been on offer, managing to create a cocktail of rum and brandy in a tall glass to the morbid curiosity of Jim and the utter bewilderment of Loona who warned her "old man" numerous times not to even think about downing it. Blitz, thinking he knew better, did so anyhow, and within minutes passed out blank onto the couch. After confirmation by Jim to a concerned Loona that the imp, in fact, hadn't died, they both hauled Blitz onto the couch, which was to be his "bed" for the evening anyways.

Jim made his way onto the balcony, with Loona coming out a little while later after confirming for herself that her paternal figure would be okay. The night was cool that evening, Jim looking out into the remarkably clear night sky, leaning on the railings. Jim turns towards Loona and nods in acknowledgment of the hellhound's arrival, Loona doing the same in return. They both stood in silence for a while before Jim finally spoke:

"So, that's your dad, hey?"

"Well, as I said, biologically, no. But he is my adoptive dad, yes," Loona responds, staring up into the night sky in admiration, before speaking again; "Blitz has been there for me, though we've only known each other for a couple of years. He tries his best with me, and I appreciate it, though as I said, I don't show it much – I don't like to. I guess it feels like I'm letting my guard down if I do, making myself more vulnerable than I ever should be," Loona explains, looking down slightly.

Jim nods, scratching his chin, thinking on what to say in response; "So, I'm guessing you've had a rough upbringing then?"

Loona looks up, turning towards Jim briefly, a ponderous look in her scarlet eyes, before looking back towards the horizon; "I don't like talking about it, but yes."

Jim sighs, still looking at Loona, his sympathies with her fully. He coughs slightly, before speaking again; "You know, Loona... excuse me for giving some advice, but you can let your guard down for your dad – as I said a couple of days ago after that fight between you and them braindead fuckheads in town, you're not as big and mean as all that, I can tell."

Loona glances back towards Jim, confused; "What do you mean?"

Jim shrugs, facing her gaze; "Well, it's sometimes harder to tell, but you do care about him. You got your folks close to your heart; that was evident when you weren't sure if he was going to come rescue you – you were lost without them. I know you don't always show it, but maybe try loosening up around him. Even if it's just once in a blue moon, just tell him; 'thank you for everything'."

Loona looks back into the house, down the hallway, as Jim continues:

"I was like that with my dad for a period when I was in my teens a couple of years ago. I got to the age of, I think, seventeen when he had a health scare, and I visited him in hospital. For whatever reason, I just thought that was going to be the very last time in

my time here on earth where I'd get to speak to my old man. I was desperate to talk to him and let him know how I truly felt about him."

Jim paused briefly, deep in thought, before swallowing and starting again:

"And... and I just told him straight. I said to him, 'Dad, I love you, stay with us.' I think you should probably open up to Blitz for even just a minute, because I can tell you love him as much as he loves you. It'll not only make him feel better about his massive, albeit flawed, efforts to help you out as his daughter, but I assure you, it'll greatly benefit you as well."

Loona looked back at Jim with ponderous eyes, deep in thought. She nodded slightly before briefly rubbing her eyes tiredly with the tips of her fingers, looking back once more into the hallway. The hellhound shifts her position from leaning on the railing before nodding to herself again, turning back towards Jim with a thoughtful expression; "I'll think about it."

Jim nods, scratching his chin once again, sitting in silence for a moment before once more replying: "It's rare to have a dad that loves you as much as Blitz does, you're very lucky."

Loona nods, glancing back at Jim; "Yeah... yeah, I guess you're right."

The rest of the time on the porch was spent admiring the clear night sky, before the two of them said their 'goodnights' before heading off to bed. Jim sluggishly entered his bedroom, with Loona being the last one up. She hesitates just before she enters her room, briefly turning around to look into the living room where a sleeping Blitz was lying face-up on the couch. Loona smiles briefly, muttering under her breath; "Goodnight, dad," before she finally makes her way to bed.

Day 6

Jim woke up the following morning, once again the first to do so. He makes his way into the living room, into the kitchen to the far end. He opens the fridge probably a little too loud for the time of the morning. He hears movement from behind him on the couch, hearing Blitz at long last wake up with a groan. The imp sluggishly wakes up, still lying down, placing his hands on his head; "Fuuuuuck..."

"You alright there, matey," Jim asks, eating a bit of fruit he found.

"Oh, yeah, yeah, just s-swell," Blitz groggily replies, a headache overpowering him; "Fuck me, it feels like the room is spinning!"

Jim shrugs: "Oh well, serve you right for drinking that bloody cocktail you made with my expensive drinks."

"How about fuck you," Blitz remarked back, smirking through his migraine.

Jim brings him a tall glass of water; "Drink this instead and shut up, how about that?"

Blitz slowly gets up, grabbing the glass and drinking it slowly. Jim, meanwhile, brings his half-eaten breakfast to his lounge chair, facing the couch this time. He properly examines the odd specimen groggily slurring on the couch; his skin is scarlet, patched with white, small spikes protruding from his arms. In short, the specimen on his couch was a mess of black, red, and white.

"You know, mate, you truly are an ugly motherfucker," Jim remarks bluntly, shaking his head at the fact that this thing actually existed and was, to his "luck", crashed on his couch with what the owner of the aforementioned couch could imagine was a hangover never matched by anyone else.

"Yeah, and you're- you're a... fucking- fuck-head-looking fucker," Blitz slurred heavily, before placing his head back onto the couch.

Jim shakes his head once more, looking outside at the sun rising. The moderate heat of the environment around them translated into a light fog in the tree line. If he didn't have to watch what this drunken bastard on the couch was about to do in his home, he'd have gone out to walk amongst it.

"Well, look, to be completely honest with you, mate, I don't think you're in any state to go pig shooting today, OR to go home. I think I recall both your daughter and I telling you very explicitly to not drink it," Jim recalled, before being rudely interrupted with hand waving and very unintelligible slurring before the specimen turned around on the couch and briefly fell back asleep.

A silhouette emerges from the hallway, into the living room. Loona looks over the couch to find Blitz still unbelievably hung over, curled in the couch in a pitiful yet hilarious position. She smirks, shaking her head, before making her way to the kitchen to fetch herself something to eat.

"How long do you reckon he'll be this way before, you know, he snaps out of it," Jim asks the 'hound, a little frustrated about having to deal with this.

Loona shrugs, chewing a few slices of ham she found, leaning over the kitchen bench; "I don't know... I say give it a few hours. He does stupid shit like this, but he gets over it soon enough."

Jim sighs, giving his house guest the benefit of the doubt. A short minute or so later, at long last, Blitz gets up from his drunken state and sits upright, trying to regain focus of his surroundings. He clammers over to the kitchen sink, splashing his face with water, blinking a couple of times, before gaining some resemblance of functionality by demanding to Jim that they go shooting right at that instant. Jim didn't take this seriously, and nor did Loona, a bystander in the conversation, who was asked numerous times by her parental figure to 'back him up' on the claim that 'he was fine'.

"Okay, look," Jim capitulated; "If you want to go hunting, you're going to have to get rid of that migraine, alright? We can do it later this morning, on the condition that anything that just so happens to happen to you is in no way my fault, and that I've got a witness over here to back me up."

Blitz nods, still trying to focus himself with a little bit more success; "You got a deal, funny man. As long as I can stand, I-I can shoot... stuff."

Jim gestures his hand to say "whatever" before heading off to get himself ready, leaving Loona with the full responsibility of looking out for the overconfident dunderhead; "I'll be in the bathroom if you need anything."

After a quick shave and an application of deodorant, he heads for the Ute to make sure everything was in order, only to discover his previously drunken 'friend' waiting outside, his respective firearm in his hands with an overconfident smirk on his face, surprisingly appearing to be in much better condition than he was minutes before.

"See," the imp called out, "What did I tell you? I'm fine!"

"You better fucken well be, or otherwise we're going to have to haul your arse back to a morgue if something happens to you," Jim retorted.

"Oh, you won't need to haul my ass anywhere, big man! If anyone's going to need their ass hauled, it's going to be me hauling yours," the overconfident little shit swiped back.

"That's what she said," Loona called out, emerging from the house and out towards the Ute.

Jim shakes his head, saying nothing, as he holsters his rifle behind the driver's seat and gets in. Soon enough, they were back on the open road, this time to a more deserted spot more in the westerly direction. After a good near twenty minutes of driving, Jim pulled his Ute off to the side of a river, surrounded by dense bushland. The tyres slipped briefly before stopping on the slightly muddy gravel bank of the river in question.

Jim retrieves his rifle, loading a full clip of rounds into it, and directing Blitz to 'get his arse out of the back' and follow him. Loona, who didn't particularly feel like doing much, hesitantly followed the pair across the timber bridge over the riverbank and towards a large open plain on the other side behind a thin line of trees. After crossing the bridge, the hound decided 'fuck it' and did her own scouting a few meters away. Jim, meanwhile, held out a pair of binoculars he had up to his eyes, slowly scanning the magnified distance.

Blitz tried to meet Jim's general line of sight, peering over; "Where the fuck are you looking at?"

"Searching," Jim simply replied.

After a brief scan of the horizon, Jim lowered the binoculars and huffed; "I swear I saw a big fuck-off group of them last week in this general area. Bloody hell, Roy, you told me this morning they were up here," he muttered to himself.

"Hey! They're over here," Loona bellowed from twenty or so meters away, on the opposite side of the bank.

Jim turned his head towards the other side, confirming Loona's claim; further down the river, about a hundred meters or more, was a small group of masses shifting near the water. Jim counted a good six to seven of them.

Jim tapped the imp's shoulder to the left of him, who was hyper-fixating on the horizon that he had already scanned with no luck; "Over this way, matey."

The pair of them sprinted over back across the bridge, to Loona's location, who was steadily tracking the boar's movements. Jim got into position, peering over, before being interrupted briefly by Loona; "Is it just me, or is there a massive one just over there? I swear, he's fucking huge!"

Jim peered over, using his binoculars, once again confirming the hellhound's suspicions; "So there is... shit, he must be a good five feet tall, and maybe... four feet long..."

"I reckon that could be yours, Loons," Blitz suggested, positioned behind a large rock nearby.

"What? Fuck no, I'm not going after that thing. The whole point of why we're out here is to prove that you're such a great shot," Loona retorted, still fixated on the absolutely massive boar.

Blitz grunted; "Yeah, well... What do you reckon, boss-man? Are we going to go after him," Blitz asked the man to his left who was surveying the pack in the distance, before chambering a round in his rifle and locking it in place.

"Sure. But keep quiet about it; Usually, the big bastards are really fucking aggressive. They see you trying to kill them, they will come after you with no fear," Jim warned, beginning to make his way up the bank.

Blitz soon followed, with Loona meanwhile choosing to hold back and observe from the distance. The two hunters slowly make their way up, trying their best to be obscured by the surrounding foliage obscuring parts of the partially mud-ridden path. They got to a safe enough distance before positioning themselves to get a clear shot.

"Go on, then, tough guy," Jim encouraged Blitz, who was positioned in the clearest spot; "That big fucker is yours."

Blitz grins, giving Jim a confirmatory 'thumbs up', before eyeing down his big, fat target. Blitz's migraine, unfortunately, hadn't completely gone, preventing the imp from properly focusing his sights. Jim notices this, asking Blitz if he was sure he could do this, with the imp retorting with "yes, I can, don't you dare doubt me," before breathing steadily and pulling the trigger.

"BANG!"

Unfortunately, the shot missed, sending the small pack of boars scurrying off in different directions up the bank and into the surrounding tree line.

Jim tries to watch out for the scattering boars, especially trying to track the huge one, fearing it would find out their location; "Didn't you tell me you were fine? What was that!"

"It was a fluke," Blitz retorted, frustrated with himself and Jim's doubts; "I'm going after that big one," Blitz announced, before stumbling off into the tree line after the huge boar!

"BLITZ! Oh, for fu- BLITZ! STOP, YOU IDIOT," Jim bellowed to no result.

Loona jogs up to Jim, trying to track the imp's location; "Where the fuck's he run off to!?"

"No idea! We got to follow him, quick," Jim ordered, running reluctantly after the overzealous imp in the bushland, calling out his name over and over with ever-growing frustration in his voice.

The pair of them ran off deeper and deeper into the bushland, the deep foliage and trees frequently slowing them down as they heard Blitz running ever deeper. Loona grunts in frustration, her athletic ability enabling her to maneuver through the scrub without much difficulty. The same, unfortunately, couldn't be said about Jim, who slogged behind, swearing on top of his tired lungs in frustration as he got snagged constantly in foliage. After much running, Loona was able to burst through the other side of the bushland, hitting another small clearing in the midst of the dense trees, finding Blitz desperately searching his surroundings for his victim.

"Blitz! W... argh-shit... wait up!" Loona wheezed, catching her breath, placing her hands on her knees after the effort of having to contend with the surrounding wilderness and its obstacles.

"Damn! He's gone, the fat fuck!" Blitz cursed, clenching his teeth in frustration, "I thought I had him!"

"Look, Blitz, he's gone! He's obviously too fast, just throw in the towel," Loona tried to convince Blitz, looking at her surroundings.

"Fuck no!" Blitz stubbornly refuted; "I'm going to find that pig by the end of today so I can prove to that hillbilly cocksucker that I'm a great fucking shot! Ohoho- he'll be so fucking pissed when I finally... speaking of that guy, where is he?"

Loona looks back towards the direction to where she came from, furrowing her brow; "I... I don't know, he was right behind me... Jim! Hey! Are you out there!?"

There was no reply.

Just as Loona is about to turn back around to face Blitz, the sound of distant gunfire can be heard; two loud, thunderous shots, followed by yelling out from within the bush! The yelling and gunshots echo throughout the trees, and it was pretty obvious after a short while of who it exactly was.

"SHIT," Loona simply exclaims, sprinting back to the path which she cleared, maneuvering once again through the dense bush!

The yelling got louder, the sounds getting clearer as the hellhound sprinted, before at last finding the shape of a huge, thick mass circling a very specific location in the pathway before her. Immediately she knew that it was Blitz's target, attacking Jim with a vengeance never before seen, lunging, and throwing its entire body weight against the man now trying his best to escape!

Loona eyes the target, quickly gaining momentum before tackling the huge boar with all of her bodyweight! She manages to shove it off Jim, sending it tumbling through the scrub, the behemoth squealing an abundance of awful ear-piercing shrieks and gurgles, being stunned by the sudden stabbing pain in its neck! Loona tears at the horrific boar's neck, desperately trying to disarm her target, before it manages to make her stumble by slipping out of her bite! With big, angry eyes, the boar glares at the hellhound, ready to make its move! Suddenly, a deafening gunshot rings out, its squealing, and predatory grunting suddenly being silenced, as it slumps over with a heavy thump!

Loona shoots her head to the right, finding Blitz aiming his rifle where the huge son-of-a-bitch once stood. He approaches the corpse of the massive brute, aiming his rifle again at the beast's temple, pulling the trigger once more to make sure it was dead.

"DON'T fuck with my daughter, you big fat whore!" Blitz bellows, hitting it with the butt end of his firearm before Loona puts her hand on his shoulder:

"Woah, woah, Blitz! I'm okay, you've killed it," she reassured, dusting herself off from the dust and dirt.

A heaving breath could be heard from within the grass behind them, Loona turning around and gazing at the spot to find Jim lying face-up in the grass and dirt, trying to catch his breath. It was obvious that he had been dazed, as he was staring wide-eyed and unfocused up into the sky above them.

"H-...H-help... f-...fuck, he- agh... help," Jim spluttered, desperately trying to catch his breath, after having the wind practically knocked out of him.

"Oh, fuck no- Jim!" Loona exclaimed, quickly rushing to his side to help him back up.

The hellhound grabs Jim's left arm and rests it around her back to prop him up, dragging him over to rest him on the base of a huge gumtree. His gaze was still unfocused, trying desperately to catch his breath. He looks around, a look of terror plastered on his face.

Blitz runs over, waving his hand in front of Jim's terrified face; "Hey, big guy, you're safe now! It's dead, you can breathe! You're not dead just yet, don't panic."

"Like that's going to help," Loona responds to her dad's efforts, before looking directly into Jim's eyes, trying to calm him down and assess the situation, both hands on his shoulders; "Hey, dude! Look at me! It's okay, you can relax now, Blitz killed it! Jim, p-please, take some deep breaths!"

At last, Jim snaps out of his trance and begins breathing deeper and slower, regaining his wit, focusing his gaze on the hellhound. Dirt and dust stained his clothes and face, his shirt tattered with a few holes from the attack!

"Shit- urgh- shit, s-shit," Jim curses between breaths, looking into the hellhound's scarlet eyes, finally coming to his senses; "I... argh! I... thought I... I thought I was-"

"Doesn't matter what you thought, big guy, you're safe now," Blitz reassured, doing something useful by handing the beaten man his tin canister of water.

Jim grabs it, thanking the imp before desperately chugging the last drops of water, letting out a huge gasp afterwards before wiping his face from the dirt.

"Thank you... thank you," Jim spluttered, at long last breathing steadily, "H-help me up, please."

Both Loona and Blitz helped him up, raising Jim from under his arms, carefully helping the roughed-up hunter back up onto his feet. He regained his footing after a slight stumble and picked up his rifle and hat, once again using it as a makeshift crutch. Jim turns his attention to the now dead behemoth lying in the grass with a few huge bullet holes punctured into the side of its massive head. After a couple of seconds at examining the huge boar, he turns towards the pair behind him:

"You... both of you... you both saved my life- I don't... I don't know how to thank the both of you enough... f-fuck... fuck, I thought I was dead," Jim choked, tears forming in his eyes.

"Of course, we were going to save your life, you idiot; you saved mine after all," Loona reassured, patting him on the back.

"I-I take back what I said to you, Blitz... you're a bloody good shot – a drunken idiot, but a bloody good shot," Jim addressed Blitz, glancing at him whilst dusting himself off.

"No way in hell I was going to let THAT motherfucker harm my Loonie... or, come to think of it, you, I guess," Blitz replied, grinning back at Jim in return, obviously proud of himself.

"You okay to walk back, or...?" Loona queried the bruised and battered "hillbilly".

Jim waved his hand, checking for any wounds that he could've possibly sustained; "Yeah, nah, I'll be okay, just... just a bit bruised and sore, is all. B-by the way, you're fur's softer than I thought it was," he joked briefly, still wheezing a bit from having the wind knocked out of him

Loona rolls her eyes, replying with a simple "shut up" before looking back at the boar, in awe of just how big and girthy it was. Upon Blitz asking what exactly to do with the boar, Jim simply replied with "just leave it to rot, it's not worth it", before the three of them began to stumble their way back through the bush, heading back to the Ute parked by the riverbank. The sun hung over them, a pleasant warmth comforting the bruised Jim who upon getting back to his vehicle slumped into the driver's seat to rest for a while.

"You know what," Jim conceded, "How about we sit around here a while, that ok? I got to lick my wounds here anyhow."

The hellhound shrugged, looking at her surroundings; "Fine by me; I like it here anyway, it's cooler," she replied, approaching a nearby towering gumtree to sit under it. Blitz followed his daughter after checking on Jim's current condition in a rare sign of 'caring' for his "rival", opting to sit down near the hellhound who took another brief selfie of

herself. The imp lies down in the dirt with his hands behind his head, closing his eyes and admiring the warmth. He was just about to doze off before a voice interrupted him:

"H-hey, uh, Blitz?"

The imp looked up, the voice coming from the hellhound to the right of him. He turns his head, his attention towards her; "Yes, Loons? What's up?"

The hellhound looks down and to the side briefly, appearing to be deep in thought. She sighs, before looking back up at her adoptive father; "I don't say this much, but... thank you, I guess... for everything you've done."

Blitz couldn't believe what he was hearing. He stutters, sitting upright, his attention now fully onto the pensive hellhound next to him; "L-Loonie, I don't... where's this coming from?"

Loona sighs, looking towards the distance at nothing in particular; "I don't know, I just... I just know that I often don't show that I'm grateful that you, well, took me in, especially with all the shit that I give you and the others. You haven't been perfect, but you're trying. I know I'm moody, abrupt, an asshole and whatever, and that's probably just me, but I just want you to know... I appreciate everything you've done for me," she concedes, a brief smile appearing on her face.

This little speech was met with a sudden hug, jolting Loona from her gaze into the distance. She looks down, finding the imp holding onto her, his arms wrapped around before conveying something simple in reply; "Don't worry, I know you appreciate it."

Loona was stunned, but instead of usually shooing Blitz away or plying him off, she embraced him back, smiling gently. This moment of embrace lasted for around ten or so seconds until it was Blitz's turn to pipe up this time. He lets go of his embrace, his eyes shifting before beginning to speak;

"Loonie, I... I'd like to say something as well," the imp began, sounding thoughtful.

The hellhound nods, signaling that she was listening.

Blitz continued; "Look... I know I haven't been a great dad to you, and... and I understand that we don't always see eye to eye. When I was trying to find a way to come get you, I had some time alone to reflect because I legitimately didn't think I... I would ever see you again."

Blitz choked up a little, before continuing:

"I'm supposed to relate to you, to at least understand on a basic level how you feel about certain things. I force you into stuff, and can also be over-protective, I recognise this now. I know it's wrong, a-and I'm sorry... I'm so sorry," Blitz choked once again, no longer able to say much more.

Loona was taken aback, surprised at these admissions. She leans in, embracing Blitz once again, who was taken aback by this gesture from the hellhound that would before be deemed impossible. She holds this embrace before speaking, albeit quiet:

"Thanks for finally understanding," Loona replies, before adding; "Oh, and I guess I apologize for kneeing you in the balls that one time. Thinking about it, I don't think you deserved that."

This moment of familial affection was interrupted by an outside voice in the Ute:

"Well, would you look at that," Jim interjected, grinning as he limped, leaning on the side of his Ute, almost falling over.

Loona grunted, rolling her eyes; "Yeah, yeah, I know, big surprise, we're making up – also, dude, you are NOT in any position to drive!"

Jim tried to play it off, standing up on both his legs before swaying a bit and just about to fall over before catching himself. Jim concedes, throwing his free hand in the air shaking his head; "Well, shit, I'm the only one who can drive, unless either of you want to have a crack at it! Can either of you drive a manual?"

Blitz interjects, verbally confirming that he could. Jim nods in return, getting into the back of the Ute this time, allowing Loona to return to her accustomed passenger's side once again.

"Ready when you two are done consoling each other," Jim announced half joking, wincing in pain from his bruising.

Blitz was the one to lead the way, taking the keys off of the wounded ex-driver and getting in, followed by the hellhound shortly after. With a bit of a struggle with getting used to the feel of the car in question, with Jim pounding on the roof to the imp to "take it easy" and "for fuck sakes, be gentle with it or I'll throttle you", Blitz managed to drive the three of them back home and surprisingly in one piece.

Jim limps his way back onto the porch, stumbling into the lounge chair outside, inviting the other two to 'help themselves' with anything in the fridge or pantry, which Blitz much appreciated. Loona, meanwhile, sat with Jim for a short minute or so, taking a picture of

the wounded hunter with his permission, smiling as much as he could in his current condition. After checking absolutely once more with the man that he was absolutely sure he was okay and didn't need anything, the hellhound also went inside, leaving the door open.

Jim, meanwhile, closed his eyes before taking a nap, being careful not to move around too much. After a short while of getting comfortable and making sure once more that he had not broken any bones, he at long last drifted off to sleep.

...

"Jim. Dude, you there? Hello?"

Jim wakes up from his sleep, grunting and opening his eyes, to be met with Loona towering over him, holding something in her hands.

"Hm? What- what's up," Jim at last replied, blinking a few times, and rubbing his eyes a bit.

"Got a letter here for you. Found it slipped under the door, I only just discovered it," Loona informed him, handing him the letter.

Jim examined it, thanking Loona, who responded with a "all good" before heading back inside, back to Blitz who by the sounds of things was on the phone to someone. Jim couldn't be bothered with the imp at the moment, instead focusing on the contents of the letter. He rips it open, flipping the folded paper open. He reads it carefully, examining every word.

"...No... no way... no, no this isn't... oh shit..." Jim whispered to himself, dumbfounded by the contents of the letter. He puts the letter in his lap and puts his hands on the sides of his head.

"And no mineral water, you know I hate it! I'm just going outside," Loona called from inside, now at the front door, turning towards Jim; "So, Jim who-"

Loona notices Jim bent over, staring down at the letter, whispering to himself. She grows aware of his current state, lowering her tone before continuing; "Dude, what's up? Who is it?"

Jim leans back on his chair, looking up briefly with an astounded and thoughtful expression, before turning to look at Loona; "It's my brother. He's coming back," he says, half smiling.

Loona becomes confused yet intrigued; "You got a brother? Well... congrats, I guess? Why, what's up, is that a good thing?"

Jim stutters before continuing; "We haven't seen Paul since four years ago when he left. We thought he was dead. But this is him- this is... this is his fucking handwriting, and his signature, and..."

Loona tries to comprehend this very sudden and unexpected information, observing Jim as he sits upright trying to figure out whether or not this was some sick joke. He looks to Loona, lost for words, his eyes narrowed in disbelief before getting up from his seat despite his bruising around his lower torso and upper left leg. He slowly walks over to the railings, looking towards the steel and corrugated iron shed adjacent to his house:

"That garage there, Paul helped me build it when I first moved in. He- he gave me a loan of about five thousand dollars to construct it. Concreting, drilling, delivery of the materials; that was all him," Jim explained solemnly; "T-then one day, four years ago, he just left. My old man told me that he just left his things and went... somewhere, we didn't know."

Jim wanted to continue, but hesitated, looking back towards Loona. He was about to try once again to say something more before he gave up, looking away. Loona leaned on the space next to him, looking in the same direction, also not sure of what to say.

"I wish I had siblings," the hellhound finally said, a blank thoughtful stare on her face; "At least a brother, or a sister. Well, as I told you a night or so ago, I somewhat got Octavia, though I don't know her too well yet, but I mean blood relatives. Take it from me, you're very lucky to have one."

Jim nods, wiping his face from the last specks of dirt left. He turns to Loona briefly, wanting to say something, but chooses not to, opting instead to give her a small smile, still not entirely sure of what to say. The temporary silence was suddenly cut short when the door swung open, revealing a frustrated imp staring down at his phone:

"Dammit! They hung up on me, the whores," Blitz exclaimed, putting it away in his pocket with an inconvenienced grunt; "Well, shit, looks like we're heading into town for the night."

"Not looking like that, you're not," Jim retorted, scoffing at the imp's foolishness; "You're going to give people bloody heart attacks looking like that, you almost gave me one when I first saw your mug in person! Why'd they hang up on you, anyway, who was it?"

"Oh, just some takeaway place in town, I probably got annoyed at them for talking over me, but that's beside the point. No offense, Jim-boy, but your taste is garbage," Blitz explained, gesturing down the hall towards the general area of the kitchen.

"Well, I'm sorry, matey, but that's what I have," Jim replied, shrugging his shoulders slightly; "You two can head into town, I don't feel like it tonight. You're going to have to walk there though, I'll probably pick you both up later in the evening."

"What are you going to do, then," Loona inquired, "Will you be okay here?"

Jim laughed, shaking his head; "Loona, I've been living here alone for four years since I was eighteen, I reckon I'll manage."

Loona smirks, replying with a simple "whatever you say, smartass" before heading back to her room to change to her human guise and to get herself ready in general. Blitz vanished back into the house as well, leaving Jim outside for a short while, returning back to his chair to sleep. He didn't snooze long before being met with a new face; it was Blitz, albeit now human, wearing his usual attire and swept-back hair.

"What do you think, tough guy, how do I look," Blitz boasted, not necessarily seeking Jim's approval – not that he would anyhow.

"Stupid. You're not wearing that in town, they'll look at you funny," Jim scoffed; "Take my coat hanging on the coat rack there, I'm sure it'll fit you. It's not a warm jacket either, so you'll be able to wear it in this weather without heating up."

"What, this old thing," Blitz questioned, bringing out the long black coat and examining it, throwing it over his shoulders and wearing it like an apron.

"Yup, that's it... and you know what? It doesn't look half bad on you, hey," Jim admitted, examining the "human" in front of him.

"Well, shit, two compliments in one day," Blitz retorted, becoming smug, "I knew you'd grow to like me!"

Jim grunts, waving his hand away; "That's a stretch and a half."

Coming out onto the deck interrupting the back-and-forth was Loona, opening the door to reveal herself once again in her human guise, wearing her usual clothing but this time with a black jacket she had bought a few days prior, suitable for the warmer yet moderate temperature outside.

"Right, so you ready yet, Blitz, or you going to keep bickering out here all night," Loona interrupted, shifting her jacket to fit comfortably.

Blitz fixed himself up, styling his newly acquired hair briefly before pointing finger-guns at Jim; "See you around, Jim-boy," he remarked, before being nudged on by Loona.

The two "humans" set off down the path, leaving Jim in his thoughts. As he watched them walk up the road back off his property and towards town, he looked back down at the letter, once again drifting off into thoughts of nostalgia. Was it really his brother, Paul? Only time would tell.

Later that evening, Loona and Blitz finally made it into town. Blitz had money of dubious origin to spend and opted to purchase a few articles of clothing and shortly after made a direct beeline to the nearest bar. Loona took her time instead, following further behind, taking in the cosy town atmosphere. Sure, the town was busy, but it was largely peaceful, which couldn't be said the same about her true home half the time. After a while, she followed Blitz into the bar he had entered, trying to find him in the crowd. She got a few looks here and there, some merely curious and some downright perverted, as she made her way down to the bar front, finding Blitz giving the barman hell to say the least.

"I'm sorry, mate," the middle-aged Barman with a slight beer gut and the fuzziest gray sideburns Loona had ever seen explained to Blitz, "But I just can't serve you something that strong. It'll kill you, guaranteed!"

"Okay, okay, I get it, sheesh!" Blitz at last capitulated; "Do you have anything else with a little bit of buzz?"

"Pint of 'Fireball' Premium Brandy; that's probably the strongest I got at the moment, which is at least legal and not literal pure turpentine," the barman emphasised.

Blitz threw a five-dollar bill onto the counter; "Two of them!"

The barman collected the bill, getting to work. Blitz meanwhile turned his attention to the newly arrived Loona, pulling up a barstool for her.

"Still giving people absolute hell, huh," Loona queried, shaking her head and smiling, finding his antics somewhat amusing instead of annoying this time.

"Hey, the customer is always right, isn't he," Blitz replied, watching the barman closely, "What's the point of going to a bar and not getting the strongest poison?"

"Oh, I dunno, probably so you don't literally die," Loona scoffed; "Maybe the bartender over here doesn't want to be responsible for your death? Hell, maybe I don't want you to die."

"Oh, come on, Loonie! It's a Friday night," Blitz chortled, "Have a bit of fun!"

Loona huffs, smiling at her parental figure; "You're insane, you know that?"

Blitz smugly smiles back; "Tell me something I don't know," he replies with his usual snarky attitude before he was interrupted by the bartender who handed the "human" his two glasses before going off and serving adjacent customers of various states of sobriety.

"Here you go, Loonie; On me," Blitz smiles, sliding his daughter one of the glasses which she catches and expresses her "thanks" before downing a few swallows of the beverage. Blitz, meanwhile, opted at attempting to scull his serving, which ended just as well as Loona expected. This time, instead of getting annoyed at his mischief, Loona found herself somewhat laid back; perhaps Jim's advice earlier on about opening up to her "old man" did benefit her.

The rest of the hour they stayed at the hotel was spent much the same, Blitz ordering another pint of Brandy, though the barman forced him to downgrade to a schooner which he begrudgingly accepted. Loona opted to hold back on the alcohol for a change, somehow knowing she'd have to escort her dad back to Jim's for another alcohol-induced crash. After a bit more drinking and perhaps privately making fun of the group of morons out the front of the bar having a fight over literally nothing, Loona along with her surprisingly sober and functional dad, began the walk back home. On the way back, both Blitz and Loona changed back to their imp and hellhound forms respectively under the cover of darkness. Despite it being dark and near pitch black, they were able to navigate their way back for a good twenty minutes, trudging up the hill and through the front door of Jim's home, now pretty much a glorified hotel.

"Hey, we're back," Loona called out, notifying the homeowner who was slumped on the couch, looking at nothing in particular.

"Wha- Oh, it's you two," Jim replies, getting up from his seat; "Well, well, look who's sober! Surprised you haven't blacked out drunk, Blitz!"

"Oh, blow me," Blitz replied, ready to head to "bed" in his accustomed couch.

"What've you been doing here all alone," Loona asked, intending for some common courtesy towards Jim.

"I've been thinking, that's what I've been doing," Jim replies, stretching his arms and grunting; "What else can I do?"

"Don't think too hard," Loona responds, slipping her jacket off and hanging it off the coat rack in the living room.

Upon Jim heaving himself off the couch with a grunt, Blitz opts to immediately crash on it, making himself comfortable and using Jim's old jacket as a makeshift sheet. Jim gave up, telling Blitz that he could keep it, noting that he needed a new one anyways. Blitz shortly after falls dead asleep, Jim opting to head to bed himself, but not before Loona quietly calls Jim's name, wanting to tell him something.

"Look, dude..." she began, taking off her own coat and folding it around her arm carefully; "...Thanks for giving me that advice, about opening up to dad earlier today. You're right, it has helped. I was properly able to, you know, hang around with him, and talk. Even made fun of some braindead dipshits fighting in the bar tonight with him."

Jim smiled; "Well, hey, I'm glad I could help. As I said, you know; spend every moment you can with him."

Loona nodded, rubbing her eyes with the tips of her fingers, feeling herself become drowsy; "I will. Thank you, Jim," she drowsily states before heading to her room to crash.

Jim nods, smiling to himself, before he himself makes his way back to his bed, Blitz's snoring slightly irritating both man and hellhound, but hey; what could they do?

...

Jim woke up suddenly, a foreign and uninviting sound jolting him out from his sleep! After waking up for a few seconds, he at last focuses. He checks the digital clock next to him: 2:30AM, it reads. Jim sits upright, the sound still emanating from somewhere within the house. He listens carefully, continuing to hear it, before at last recognising what it was; someone or something was growling repeatedly.

Jim shoots up, pretty sure on who it could be. He stumbles out of bed and into the hallway, staring at the door adjacent to his room, confirming that the growling was coming from Loona's room.

"What the fuck," Jim whispers to himself.

He is suddenly startled by Blitz who snuck up on him from the living room, his eyes slightly illuminated in the dark.

"What's going on," Blitz asks, concerned.

"I don't know," Jim whispers, before they both jump, suddenly hearing the hellhound let out the loudest yell of genuine fear! They hear her from within the room desperately pleading to someone or something!

"NO! FUCK, PLEASE! D-Don't make me go back there! Please don't!"

Blitz was the first to react, suddenly swinging the door open to reveal Loona who was cowering in the corner, her back pressed up against the wall, a genuine look of terror plastered on her face! She's dazed and confused, trying her best to cower away, continuing to beg pitifully before her eyes shift towards Blitz standing in the doorway.

"L-Loonie..." Blitz simply spoke, overwhelmed with concern.

Loona stutters, briefly calming down and breathing heavy and deep, still cowered in the corner; "Blitz, I... I don't... Don't send me back there," she pleas, her voice cracking.

Almost immediately, Blitz knew exactly what she was talking about. His heart sinks, lost on what to say. For whatever reason, Blitz turns his head towards Jim who was standing in the hallway. Jim stared back, a look of worry and confusion on his face. Blitz turns back around, deciding to slowly approach her. She hesitates, attempting to retreat more before she realizes that she is safe, allowing for Blitz to come forward.

Blitz sits down in front of Loona, concern still very much expressed deep in his eyes. He places his hand on Loona's shoulder, trying to mouth something off before speaking; "You're safe."

Loona freezes, calming down at last. She stares into Blitz's eyes, trying to hold her composure after her sudden night terror. She felt so vulnerable and weak, unable to defend herself, needing Blitz's support for something so fucking stupid. This effort to compose herself was futile as Loona then all of a sudden did something she never had done before in recent memory; she broke down; Not growing pensive or getting watery, a complete and utter breakdown. She weeps, suddenly holding on to Blitz in a massive embrace, burying her face into his chest, no longer able to keep her composure.

Loona whispers through her uncontrolled sobs over and over, trying to catch her breath; "I'm sorry, I'm- I'm so sorry... I'm sorry..."

Blitz, meanwhile, rubs her back, feeling himself getting emotional. He says nothing, allowing his adoptive daughter to open up completely with no disruption. This lasted for a whole minute, the hellhound weeping over and over, until she finally managed to calm down, lifting her head up from Blitz's chest, looking into his gaze through misty eyes.

"Loons, you know I'd never let you go. I know I can be an asshole myself, but never to you. It's only a dream, it's not reality," Blitz reassures, holding her shoulders with both hands.

Loona nods softly, her cheeks wet with tears, as she wipes them with her palms. She looks back up after wiping them away from her eyes, softly smiling: "I know... I- I know. Ugh, shit, I'm dumb."

Blitz points his finger at her, albeit with no maliciousness; "Hey, I don't want to hear anyone talk about my Loonie that way, yeah? That includes you."

Loona nods, chuckling softly as she composed herself at last, her eyes still slightly sore and wet with tears. Blitz helps her up, taking her hand and pulling her back up onto her feet after checking if she was okay to do so.

"What do you want to do now? Want me to stay here with you," Blitz asks in a rare show of offering an option for privacy.

Loona thinks about her options, hesitating before she finally answers; "C-can I sit with you for a while?"

Blitz nods before leading her back on to her bed, the pair of them sitting in silence, looking outside into the night sky which was remarkably clear in their slightly remote location, away from artificial light sources.

"Hey, where'd that big moron go," Blitz asks, looking back outside in the hallway, before he calls out; "Hey, moron! Are you out there?"

"I'm on the veranda, mate," Jim calls back; "Stay with your daughter for a while."

"Don't tell me what to do," Blitz remarks back, before continuing to stay with Loona.

"And what do you do? You stay with me. So much for big, independent Blitz," Loona replies, managing to half-smile after her breakdown, some tears still staining her face.

"I'm here by choice," Blitz refutes with a smirk as he gazes out with the hellhound into what was perhaps the most mesmerizing night sky he had ever seen.

The two of them stared out up into the "abyss" for a solid ten minutes, being lost in the moment. It was shared opinion between the both of them that, in the five or so years that they had known each other, this was perhaps the closest that they had ever been, remarkably yet unsurprisingly. In addition, it was Loona's own personal observation that she seemed to enjoy this closeness, something she never thought she would find even remotely satisfying.

After a while, Loona informed the imp next to her that she would be returning to sleep, with Blitz obliging, before getting up and closing the door behind him, leaving Loona to her privacy, but not before he checked with her that she was "absolutely sure" that she was alright. After closing the door behind him, Blitz sighs and heads back to the couch to crash once more. Jim, meanwhile, chose to stay out on the porch, finding himself dozing off in the lounge chair, aware of the seemingly once-in-a-lifetime camaraderie that had just occurred in that room that early morning.

Day 7

Jim wakes up groggily at around seven in the morning, the first thing he sees as he opens his eyes is the remarkable pink-hue that glowed with the sun. He gets up, the bruising in his lower torso and upper legs from the day before no longer rendering him pained when he moved. He trudges back inside, finding Blitz outside Loona's door, leaning against the adjacent wall. He nods to Jim, to which Jim nods back.

"How's she going," Jim asks.

"Still asleep," Blitz replies, sipping some coffee he had brewed for himself.

From the hallway, Jim could see that there was a second cup of coffee sitting on the kitchen bench, still hot and steaming away.

"Who's that for," Jim asks, pointing towards it.

"Oh, that? For my Loons. You go make your own," Blitz smirks, patting Jim on the back from his shorter stature, before Jim shoots him a look that said "don't touch me again".

"How thoughtful, mate," Jim half jokes before getting his rifle out of the cabinet and inspecting it out of boredom, leaning on the wall across from Blitz. Jim quickly dips into his room, throwing on his red button-up shirt, dark-gray trousers and a pair of black socks before coming back out and returning to his side of the hallway, once again inspecting his rifle carefully from front to back.

Finally, Loona comes out of her room in her usual attire, ruffling her hair and patting down her fur a bit to make it somewhat presentable. She notices the two of them, saying to both of them collectively a "morning" before heading into the living room, stopping as she notices a cup of coffee.

"Who- who's that for," Loona asks, spinning around.

"It's not mine," Jim replies, "your old man over here has made it for you."

Loona blinks, looking towards Blitz surprised before giving him a small smile; she wasn't used to this amount of generosity; "O-oh... thanks, dad," she lets slip, suddenly realizing what she had just called the imp.

Jim smiles in the background whilst Blitz is left pleasantly dumbfounded.

The hellhound clears her throat before pointing to the both of them; "Don't you dare tell anyone else that I call you that," she instructs Blitz, slightly embarrassed.

Blitz chuckles, assuring that he wouldn't, which would probably later on prove to be a lie. Jim, meanwhile, puts his rifle away before walking past Blitz, into the living room and looking outside through the windows, admiring the view of the morning sunrise reflecting through his little abode.

The phone ringing in Blitz's pocket startles Jim out of his gaze, turning around to see the imp fumble the phone out of his pocket and answer it:

"Moxxie! Are they gone? ... oh thank fuck! ... yeah, we're just squatting over at some idiot's house. ... yes, the same one. ... Yeah, I found her. ... No, no, I was wrong, she's completely fine! Where are you now? ... Okay, we'll meet back in the next twenty-four. ... Okay, just dandy, I'll see you back at the office."

"I take it that's one of the others, is it," Jim asks Loona adjacent to him.

"Yup, that would be him," Loona responds, sipping her coffee; "He's that little one with the white hair I showed you a couple days ago."

Blitz scoffs, butting in as usual; "Hah! Little? He's too much of a fat motherfucker to be little!"

"Fat?" Jim chimes in, genuinely confused at this notion; "Matey, I've seen fatter blokes at the Olympics, what are you talking about?"

"Ah, you wouldn't get it," Blitz retorts, perhaps being too lazy to explain; "Anyways, big guy, looks like you'll soon have your house back to yourself. Just got to wait for fat fuck to confirm the coast is clear again, then will hit the road!"

"Until then," Jim adds, scratching his chin, "it seems I'm still stuck with your arse until and if that happens. ... Well, look, because this is probably the last day for the both of you here, ... we'll chill out here for the day, bugger it."

"Weren't you going to make Blitz here do some work for you; you know, as "rent,"" Loona reminds Jim with a smirk on her face directed at Blitz.

Blitz's eyes widened, shaking his head desperately at his daughter, whispering through his teeth; "Loonie- Loons, no- why've you gotta do this to me."

"Probably because it's fun," Loona smugly replies, that wide, betraying smirk on her face, though she meant no maliciousness.

Jim stops, thinking for a moment. He considers his options, finally looking back towards the pained Blitz who had a look of betrayal on his face like he was being sentenced in court for cooking meth.

Jim chuckles through his teeth, shaking his head and waving his hand away in dismissal; "Nah, stuff it! I'll give your old man here a rest, Loona; he's old and tired, needs his rest," he remarks.

Blitz grunts and mumbles something under his breath, obviously not taking the comment well, which he rarely ever did in regards to any criticism. Loona is the next to speak up as she gets up from her accustomed lounge chair and observes one of the cabinets, finding a row of DVD cases, one of them catching her eye. She raises her brow with curiosity, opening the glass doors and pulling the case which caught her attention.

"Why don't we watch this? This seems like something up your alley, Blitz," Loona suggests, handing the case to Blitz who examines it, trying to read the title with little success.

"I'm sorry, I can't read this. What is this, Jim-boy," Blitz capitulates, throwing it in Jim's hands.

Jim picks up the case and reads it for Blitz, immediately recognising what it is: "Oh, it's that mercenary documentary from the 70s! Loona's right, mate, I think you'll love this; It's pure, unfiltered footage of a group of mercenaries in... I think the Congo or something or other. Seeming you're pretty much a merc', I think you'll relate to this!"

Blitz scoffs, giving Jim a baffled look, almost incredulous; "What the f- Mercenary!? Excuse me, but I'm a professional! I PROFESSIONALLY murder!"

"So do mercenaries," Jim explains; "And if I remember correctly, Loona here told me you get paid to go out and kill certain people with weaponry in exchange for some serious cash, which is the very definition of a mercenary."

Blitz is taken aback, somewhat impressed with Jim's wit. He stutters before coming to his concluding defense: "Y-yeah- well... you see-... s-shut up."

Jim rolls his eyes before getting up from his chair, turning on the TV and slipping in the DVD contained inside. The three of them get comfortable, Loona opting to raid the fridge and bring out some things, mostly for herself. After a little while of loading, the documentary begins to play. The film goes on for a while, Loona watching it with mild interest of just how anarchistic the entire process of guerrilla warfare was. In many cases, the scenes did remind her of the things her associates got up to. Blitz, meanwhile, took the opportunity to become a running commentator on the things he personally thought these "guns-for-hire" were doing wrong:

"I mean- look at this idiot," Blitz bellowed from his 'high horse'; "He's got a machine gun in his hands and is just SPRAYING that holdout with bullets! Motherfucker- AIM THE FUCKING THING!"

"Shut up, I'm watching!" Loona says, keeping her eyes on the TV and momentarily looking down on her phone out of brief boredom and sipping on a can of lemonade she found, as Blitz opts to critique in his head with his flawless "expertise" in handling firearms.

The documentary lasts an hour and a half, Loona taking photos of both the man and imp next to her, a selfie of herself, and a brief 10-second video of Blitz continuing to claim to be a de-facto critic. As the documentary comes to a close, the familiar sound of Blitz's ringtone emanates from his pocket.

Blitz answers the phone promptly; "Hey hey, Mox! What's the latest? ... You're for certain? ... Okay, good, we'll meet you back there, give us an hour!"

"So, then," Jim concludes as he unlocks the front door and heads to his room to store the equipment away; "that's that then? You're both going home?"

"Seems so, Jim-boy," Blitz replies with a spring in his step, going to retrieve his firearm which he momentarily kept beside Jim's couch; "thanks for being such a good boy and letting us crash here for a couple of days! Your hospitality and presence was much appreciated!"

Jim shakes his head, grunting; "Same can't be said about you, you shortarse," Jim remarks back half-joking, with Blitz choosing to ignore the reply altogether.

With that, Loona returns to her room once again to retrieve her things that she bought earlier in the week, including the pajamas and jacket which she grew quite fond of.

After a little while, Jim meets Blitz who was waiting on the front porch for the hellhound.

"So what are you going to do from now on without us," Blitz asks, breaking the silence, as the homeowner leaned on the post whilst running his fingers through his hair.

"I dunno, just do what I do everyday usually," Jim responds, looking out into the distance with a pensive look on his face; "I'll probably be alone again, as usual," he adds, laughing.

Blitz smirks at Jim with a knowing look in his eyes; "You're going to miss my Loonie, aren't you?"

Jim thinks about it before nodding; "I think so, yeah."

Blitz nods in a rare display of understanding the homeowner in a respectful manner. He then speaks again; "who knows, maybe we'll stop by sometime."

Jim shoots Blitz a glare, chuckling slightly; "With your mannerisms, matey, I'd rather you not," he half jokes.

Soon after, Loona emerges back outside onto the veranda from within the house, her few belongings folded on her arm. She looks back out onto the veranda and admires the remarkably clear day. The hellhound sighs, taking in the atmosphere once more.

"You go ahead, Blitz, I'll catch up," Loona informs the imp.

Blitz obliges, heading off into the distance before stopping to turn around; "You coming yet, Loons?"

"I will, just give me a minute!" She calls out to the imp before turning back around to Jim; "Hey, look... I want to say thank you for, you know, everything you've done; the advice you've given me, the hospitality, and just for... being nice. I dunno, I just feel that you've helped me open up more; I feel calmer and less isolated, you know? And without you, well... without you this past week, I'm not sure if I would still be alive."

"Nah, you're all good," Jim replies, smiling briefly. He hesitates for a minute, not sure of what exactly to say next before continuing; "You think you'll ever come back? You know, thinking about it, I did enjoy your company and all. We could go hunting again, I know you enjoyed it."

Loona stops, thinking about the proposal. She looks back towards Blitz who was waiting across the road hidden in the tree line before turning back around.

"You know what? I think I will; probably in a month I'd say or whenever I feel like it. I don't say this much and nor do I often feel this way, but I quite like hanging with you. It's fun, yet chill," Loona affirms, smiling.

Jim smiles in return, glad to hear this. He extends his hand to shake hands with Loona, to which she obliges, shaking his hand firmly as well as pulling him close and patting his shoulder.

"I'll see you around, Jim," she smiles, pointing finger guns at him before adding; "And good luck with reuniting with your brother later!"

"Cheers!" Jim calls out as he watches the 'hound sprint across the road, following Blitz into the trees where he swore he could see something open up in the midst of the thicket. Before Loona completely enters the bush land, she stops and turns around to look at Jim who was standing there, watching her leave. She gives a brief wave to say goodbye, the homeowner doing so in return, before she turns back around and follows Blitz back into the portal before it closes.

Jim shakes his head, a somewhat melancholic look in his eyes. For the time being he was alone again, but hopefully if she was a hound of her word, Loona would return.

"See you later, you crazed bloody dog," he laughs to himself, before heading back inside to fix himself some late lunch.

Epilogue

"Well, here we are," Loona announces, helping Octavia out through the portal and into the surrounding bushland.

"Woah," Octavia simply expresses, in awe of the incredibly new surroundings; "So, this is it?"

"Yup! It's nice, isn't it," the hellhound asks, making sense of where they were, though soon enough she knew through the help of some natural landmarks she had seen the month earlier.

This was the first time that Loona had returned to this side of Earth since the month prior, this time knowing how to return home, as well as bringing along Octavia to get her away from all the monotonous drama at home. On this occasion, Loona wore her usual gray crop top, the black jacket she had bought the month prior and a pair of long camouflage pants. Octavia meanwhile wore a long black pair of pants with some runners, a white t-shirt and her accustomed beanie.

"I'm really not sure about this," Octavia stutters, quite nervous and fidgety; "What if he's different this time then how you last saw him? What if it was an act?"

"Jim's okay, Octavia," Loona reassures with a kind smile, gently holding her shoulder to soothe her as they walk through the bushland, weaving in between trees and small dips in the terrain; "He may look tall and intimidating, but he is decent and welcoming; he just looks a bit rough around the edges. Hey, look; if he tries anything stupid or weird, I'll absolutely protect you."

"Mm... okay, if you say so," Octavia acknowledges, still nervous about having to meet someone completely new, let alone on Earth.

After walking a good couple of minutes through the scrub and noticing members of the local wildlife which Octavia observed with a kind of shy curiosity, they finally breached the end of the bushland, coming across a break where a road divided the land, a car passing by which they hid from just in case. Just across from them, up a slight hill, was Jim's home, looking very much the same as Loona remembered it.

"This is it," Loona informed the shy Octavia next to her who looked towards it with hesitancy to approach it; "What do you think?"

"It... it looks nice, I like the colours, I think," Octavia noted, getting a little closer to Loona for safety.

Loona notices this and gently pats her shoulder; "You ready to go up?"

Octavia thinks for a moment, her eyes shifting, before she finally nods slightly.

"Okay, follow me," Loona instructs her, before crossing the road quickly before making their way up over the gate and up the gravel and dirt path towards the house. A gentle breeze blowing down the hill itself, cooling them both down.

Octavia could feel herself getting more nervous by the minute, though Loona swearing she would protect her earlier managed to give her some type of reassurance that nothing could go too wrong. The two of them walk up onto the veranda, the floorboards creaking under their weight slightly, Octavia opting to hide behind Loona's back slightly, peering towards the door in worried anticipation.

Loona then proceeds to knock on the door, making sure to knock loudly in case he couldn't hear them. Initially, there was no reply. She knocks on the door again, this time a very familiar booming voice calling out from somewhere within: "Coming!"

Octavia hears the movement from within the house, becoming increasingly more nervous. She begins fidgeting with her beanie in her hands, trying to calm herself, wondering why the man inside was taking so long. What if he was planning something? Loona said something earlier before they arrived in this strange place that he had a gun; was he planning on ambushing them and shooting them? What if he was going to hold them hostage? These thoughts ran through her head, before she finally spoke, albeit softly to the hellhound in front of her:

"Loona- I'm sorry, I- I don't think I can do this," she stutters, her voice obviously very nervous.

"It's okay, just hold on to my hand. You'll be okay-," Loona tries to reassure, still looking at the door, both of them hearing the sound of loud footsteps on the floorboards approaching from the other side.

Unfortunately, the nervousness and thoughts of the occupant's intention overwhelmed Octavia who pulled away from Loona's hand and hurried away down the porch and around the side of the house to hide; "I'm sorry, I-I can't do it!"

Loona looks back towards Octavia, seeing her cower behind the other side of the house; "Hey, wait! Octavia!"

Jim finally opens the door, wearing his usual outing clothes, finding Loona standing in front of the entrance. The hellhound turns back around, meeting his eyes.

His eyes light up, a genuine welcoming smile forming on his face: "Oh shit, look who it is! Loona, mate, you came back!"

Loona smiles, putting her hand up briefly to say hello; "Hey, dude, long time no see," she replies, glancing behind her to try and find Octavia.

Jim notices this, confused; "What's up?"

Loona turns back around; "Look, I bought Octavia along with me and she's gotten nervous about meeting you. I think she's hiding around the house," she explains.

"Ah, yeah," Jim asks, looking in Loona's general line of sight, "I'll come out and meet with her, yeah? I take it she's a shy little thing."

Loona nods in confirmation, sympathy for Octavia reflected on her face; "She is, she's more or less a recluse like me. I think you should wait here on the porch and sit down on the steps, so you're as small as possible," Loona suggests, going to find Octavia. Jim obliges, going to sit on the steps up to the veranda, taking off his broadbrim hat so he wouldn't look as intimidating.

Loona, meanwhile, loops around the house to find her in the back, crouched down and trying her best to make herself small. The owl has got a look of genuine worry on her face, though is relieved to find Loona approaching her.

The hellhound crouches down as well, gently extending her hand towards Octavia; "Via, it's okay. He's not going to hurt you, I promise. I was just talking to him, he understands."

"...He doesn't have a gun or a knife on him, does he," Octavia quivers, holding on to Loona's hand tightly before huddling closer to the hellhound.

"No, no, nothing like that! It's all locked away! He's sitting down on the porch for you," Loona reassures as she leads the nervous Octavia back to the front, albeit slowly to give her a bit of time to gather her nerves; "Be brave, okay?"

Octavia nods slowly, her beanie resting over her eyes slightly to give her some form of comfort. At last, the pair of them arrive back to the front, finding Jim looking out into the horizon, only to turn his gaze to the duo approaching him. He maintains his sitting position, making himself as small and approachable as possible.

"Hey, again," Loona greets Jim once more, before showing Octavia who was huddled a bit behind her back; "So, yeah, this is Octavia."

Jim nods his head towards the owl, putting up his hand briefly to say hello; "Hey, Octavia, how's it going," he says in a softer, more welcoming voice.

"I'm... I'm okay," Octavia timidly responds, coming around from behind Loona; "A-are you Jim?"

"That's me," Jim informs, still sitting down and putting his hands up to show he meant no harm; "You want to come up and sit with us? Loona there will protect you, I know she will, but I promise you; there's no threat from me to you. Okay?"

Octavia thinks about it for a bit, looking at Loona who nods her head, smiling in reassurance. She turns her nervous and unsure gaze back towards Jim, nodding; "O-okay... I'll trust you."

Octavia, holding tightly onto Loona's hand, approaches Jim as he gets up slowly and makes his way to the front door, still attempting to make his new house guest feel as comfortable as possible.

"See? He's not a threat - he looks rough, but he's alright. He saved my life, after all," Loona reassured, sticking by Octavia's side.

"W-wait," Octavia asks, turning to look at Loona with a confused glance as they finally hopped onto the veranda; "What do you mean?"

"Oh, well," Loona explained, "It's a long story. In short, he found me almost passed out in that creek bed we crossed over, he took me in and for the week I was stuck here, we became close, I guess."

"You remind me a lot of Loona here, Octavia," Jim piped in, smiling welcomingly as he opened the door to let them both in; "Want to come inside?"

Octavia thought about it, looking at Loona for guidance; "Do you want to?"

Loona smiled, shrugging briefly; "Whatever you want to do, this is your little getaway as well."

The owl thought about it, looking inside; the interior hallway did look welcoming, all nice, clean and timeless. She thinks a little more, both the homeowner and hellhound completely understanding her hesitation and committing to being very patient. After a while, she nods with a very small and brief smile; "O-okay, sure."

Jim nods, obliging. He holds the door open, Loona walking in before saying "thank you", and the nervous Octavia expressing her thanks as well, albeit quietly, still nervous about the whole thing, though she was more comfortable with his understanding demeanor.

Loona leads Octavia to the couch, sitting with her to keep her comfortable. Jim walks in shortly after before heading into the kitchen and bringing out a steel tray of a jug of lemonade and some glasses with a few ice cubes in them, setting it on the coffee table, before sitting in his lounge chair and turning it around to face them.

Loona is the first to take her glass, filling it up with the jug. She sips it a little to show the hesitant Octavia that there was nothing in it. This helped Octavia slowly take her full glass and cautiously take a sip. It tasted fresh, slightly bitter yet sweet.

"T-thank you so much," Octavia expressed her gratitude to Jim, who nodded with a smile as he scratched his neck briefly.

"So, what's been happening, Jim," Loona asks Jim from across the coffee table, crossing her legs.

Jim chuckles, sipping his beverage; "Ah, nothing much. Been working, been hunting. It's been a good past month. At long last reunited with Paul last week with mum and dad. He's different from what I remember him, and not the bad type of difference either. Turns out he got involved with the wrong people and had to make a run for it for our sakes," Jim explains to the mild surprise of Loona.

"So, Paul is... your brother," Octavia pipes in, feeling increasingly more comfortable with Jim's presence.

"He is! How'd you know, did Loona tell you," Jim asks, with Octavia nodding, confirming his suspicions as being true.

"What about you, Loona," Jim asks in return; "how you been doing, what's been up?"

Loona huffs, shrugging; "Oh, you know. Same old shit I have to deal with. Blitz is fine, he's... actually improved somewhat. Like he's not that pushy anymore, he asks if I want privacy and all that. Sure, he can still be an asshole to people, but he's become more... chill with me, you know what I'm saying?"

Jim raises his brow, surprised to hear this; "Huh. So he's actually capable of change?"

Loona shrugs; "It looks like it, I think. And that Moxxie guy I told you about, I've noticed I've stopped giving him as much shit as I used to. I dunno, but something tells me staying out here for more than a day or so is therapeutic for me. As I said a month ago to you, when you beat yourself up about being a "dullard", it's peaceful out here. Also why I bought Octavia."

Jim smiles, laughing warmly; "Well, I'm glad to hear. And I suppose meeting someone as, well, bizarre as you has been interesting. Even now you look intimidating, but hey, what can I do?"

Loona chuckles, grinning; "I'm always going to look frightening, dude. That's a given!"

"What about you, Octavia," Jim turns his attention to Octavia who was listening carefully, though perhaps still timid; "Want to talk about or ask anything?"

She thinks for a moment, before finally speaking; "Uhm... you, uh, want to ask me something?"

"I suppose," Jim asks; "Alright, here's one; what do you like doing?"

Octavia hesitates once again for a minute before answering, drinking the lemonade which she had grown fond of; "It probably sounds weird, but.. I like taxidermy."

Jim raises his brow, genuinely interested; "Ahh, taxidermy? Well, shoot, I know a bloke who does taxidermy; lives about ten minutes away from here. An older gentleman I once met in the pub, his name's Rob. He owns a little store with some taxidermy stuff, maybe Loona and I will get something back for you from there."

"R-really," Octavia asks, her so-far shy demeanor perking up slightly; "T-that would be nice of you."

Jim pours himself another glass before speaking again; "So! You're staying for the next couple of days, yeah?"

"That's the plan," Loona informs, looking at Octavia who nodded at Jim as a second source of confirmation; "What have you got planned for us?"

"Oh, I got some ideas," Jim replies as he pours Octavia another bit of lemonade upon request. And with that, their half-week getaway began.

-=END=-